Better Living Through Extensity

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A reduction of material production and consumption rates—and a related desire to challenge the economic growth paradigm—have once again become core values for radical urbanists concerned with pressing environmental matters including natural resource depletion and loss of biodiversity. Underlying these values is a critique that any hope of achieving an appropriate response vis-à-vis 'sustainability' is an exercise in futility: a game of cat-and-mouse lacking conceptual clarity and hopelessly devoted to a metaphysical state of harmonious balance. As a moving target, the 'zero horizon' (if even achievable) would either be surpassed or vacated the instant it was attained, owing to the dynamism of the phenomena involved. From a spatial perspective, these criticisms often turn their sights on the notion of 'sustainable development', which has been plagued for years with an unwavering devotion to the *city* as both a unit of study and a geographical space. The notion of 'sustainable development' was originally put forth by the UN through its publication *Our Common Future* (1987)—often referred to as the 'Brundtland Commission Report'. Its core ethos was that society can remain committed to an economic growth model ('development'), as long as we do so through the establishment of limits. Enforced through regulatory legislation, 'limits' quickly became spatialized as the 'compact city'. Equally problematic is the persistent claim that an urban system's 'ecological footprint' offers a definitive metric for performance, in turn recommending the 'compact city' as the ideal type-form for an environmentally responsible society. However, in both ideas- sustainable development and the compact city—the city is really no more than a red herring.

Much of this confusion has to do with two misguided beliefs. On the one hand, there is an implication that any model of urbanism not compact or clearly delimited in spatial extent is detrimental to the environment. On the other hand, in taking the metaphor of society's ecological footprint quite literally, it implies the very

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opposite: that compact urban form and a heightened distinction between urban and rural are crucial elements for our survival. The crudity of these formulations belies the great complexity of territorial systems, and is open to significant interrogation. At the same time, it is out of step with maturing concepts in fields such as critical geography, including that of planetary urbanization. A clearer set of goals—no less radical, but freed from the burden of a phantom benchmark—lies within the agenda of *reduction*. Proponents of degrowth, post-growth, and other strategies of reduction have recently been articulating the transformations needed to foster this brave new world.[1] More than anything, it requires living differently; it means living better with less. This brief text argues that an extensive (rather than intensive) model of urbanism is best suited to foster a strategy of reduction. The central argument for an extensive urbanism builds on the work of thinkers in the fields of social theory, economics, and urban ecology, beginning at the moment in which the environmental movement gained traction in the early 1970s. Perhaps the most tractable thinking was that of social theorist Murray Bookchin and environmentalist Edward Goldsmith.

In *The Limits of the City* (1974), Bookchin set the tone by calling for a decentralism in the name of a radical socio-ecological project. In it, and in numerous later publications such as *Urbanization without Cities* (1992), Bookchin held to his central conviction that hierarchical societies are intimately linked to a Promethean domination of nature. Accordingly, Bookchin's eco-decentralism in spatial terms was framed as an eco-anarchism in social and governmental terms. He saw a system of limited government in which "the economy, society and ecology of an area are administered by the community as a whole" (Bookchin 1974). New models of decentralized agriculture, in this society, would offer not "a fanciful fight to a remote agrarian refuge, but of a systematic recolonization of the land along ecological lines" (Bookchin 1974). At roughly the same time, British environmentalist Edward Goldsmith outlined in his *A Blueprint for Survival* (1972) an ambitious plan to confront ecological crisis by cultivating a 'stable society'.[2] Significantly, this new paradigm necessitated a comprehensive urban restructuring that should have garnered a great deal more interest from the design disciplines than it did. In contrast to the dense, compact urban aggregations consistently advocated for in contemporary mainstream discourse, *A Blueprint for Survival* instead proposed to abandon the city as we know it and distribute human settlement across a much broader territory. The newly reconfigured system was to consist of a vast urban field of small, self-regulated communities. In this model, Goldsmith was advocating for a radical program of decentralization and deindustrialization as the most effective means of

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[1]For a valuable introduction, see political and economic theorist Serge Latouche's *Farewell to Growth* (2009).

[2]The book's primary author was Goldsmith, but it included important contributions from his editorial colleagues at UK-based journal *The Ecologist*, including Robert Allen, Michael Allaby, John Davoll, and Sam Lawrence. Goldsmith and Allen were the founding editors of the journal, which launched in January of 1972—devoting the entire inaugural issue to the very same text of *A Blueprint for Survival* published in book form later that year.

curbing the environmental damage caused by growth-oriented industrial societies. Simply put, when qualified, environmental scientists entered the debate, *their very first impulse was to decentralize.*

In the thinking of Bookchin and Goldsmith (and others since) there is a clear dismissal of the bounded city, and a commitment to extensive territorial systems. Yet extensity does not, in itself, guarantee a reduction of production and consumption rates.[3] What it *does* do is to allow the 'small, self-regulated communities' these thinkers were in favour of to thrive. Notably, the issue of scale was not about limiting the spatial footprint in a bid to avoid damage. The ambition was rather to introduce a new social structure that Goldsmith and Bookchin felt would operate most effectively at a smaller scale.[4] With Goldsmith's work, for example, the proposed social structure was to theoretically have the capacity (owing to its smaller size and greater degree of self-regulation) to *internally reduce the need for material goods* and hence break the vicious cycle of production and consumption that was at the heart of *A Blueprint for Survival's* critique.[5,6]

This narrative is significant when considering contemporary patterns of urbanization, which—owing to broad restructuring under post-Fordist economics—often present an equally decentralized morphology.[7] It is not much of a stretch, then, to imagine that the spatial ambition of 1970s radical environmental thinking is synchronous with the teleological path of post-Fordist economic restructuring and the effect it is having on urban morphology. In both instances, a common vector has emerged toward horizontality, devolution, and decentralization.[8] However, it remains thus far unrealized. And after the UN's Brundtland Commission released its report in 1987 calling for 'sustainable development', any hope of a synergy between an eco-decentralism and mature (post) industrial urban systems has been shelved in favor of a traditionalist approach committed to the compact city. Against

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[3]Nor does it preclude density; in fact, to suggest that low-density (as an opposition to the high-density model of the compact city) is the key to sustainability perpetuates the belief that it is the built environment that is the problem.

[4]Recourse to a 'small' scale was a trope that permeated environmentalist thinking in the 1970s; likely the most notable contribution was economist E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973).

[5]Goldsmith et al. encouraged sweeping reforms in society to accomplish this spatial restructuring-including the adoption of entirely new institutional and governmental structures to both initiate decentralization and to maintain it. They briefly considered the role of a central government before ultimately dismissing it as far too distant and coercive to be an effective partner in any significant urban and social restructuring.

[6]It should also be noted that any such 'self-regulation' marches hand-in-hand with the notion of autonomy. An extensive urban matrix supports the cultivation of autonomous social units, decoupled from the system we currently live in.

[7]Patrik Schumacher and Christian Rogner have described this as a "decentralizing anti-urbanism" brought about through the "re-application of Fordist principles of production on regional and national scales."

[8]This is not to mention *lateral relations, flattened hierarchies*, *ad hoc coalitions*, and the like—conditions that can be read as socially progressive. Ironically, they also align conceptually with those very same economic forces that often preclude their emergence.

the backdrop of the intensive, compact city model so hegemonic today, it seems that there is ample room in the conversation to explore the urban alternative lying dormant in the scattered field we occupy. Foregrounding such a project for the design disciplines would suggest two strategic frameworks. First is the development of tools and practices (both spatial and material) for the evolution of *existing territories* that are best described as horizontal, diffuse, and extensive. In other words, places that have been empirically documented as such are halfway there (here we could imagine the Veneto, Atlanta, or Houston). They already have the seeds of a relevant spatial pattern. This model might therefore be seen as a kind of 'ecological retrofit'. Second is the development of similar tools and practices for *new and emerging territorial systems.* China, for example, presents a scenario in which new 'cities' for millions of people are currently being schemed through initiatives like Beijing's *National New-Type Urbanization Plan*. The plan's ambition to increase the rate of urbanization in the country from 54 to 60% by 2020 recognizes, encouragingly, the social and environmental dimensions of the process.[9] In that sense, it serves as a useful framework to imagine a model of better living for a socio-ecological future. Ultimately, by fostering new social structures-themselves able to select a policy of reduction and a related attention to planetary health—an urbanism of extensity sees the horizontal metropolis as a radical *environmental project*.

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[9]This is in notable contrast to previous post-1978 urbanization patterns in China, the social and environmental record of which is troubling by any measure.