

WHAT SORT OF A CITY ? Needed : an alternative for urban living

by Maurie Crow
Reprinted for Metro 2000, October 20th 1990.

Maurie Crow presented the following paper at the "What Sort of City ?" seminar which was held in Melbourne in November 1987 to discuss ideas for an "alternative society". It was the last document prepared by Maurie before his death in April 1988.

Maurie was one of the authors of the book "Seeds for Change - Creatively Confronting the Energy Crisis" which was published by the Conservation Council of Victoria in 1978. This paper presents the ideas of "clustering and connecting" which are proposed in the "Seeds for Change" model.

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Cities for Citizens

by Maurie Crow, November 1987

Problem

Australia is one of the most urbanised countries, its cities amongst the most motorised, and more of its citizens live in big cities than smaller ones. Over the last forty years the resulting "suburban sprawl" has suited the world's largest corporations - oil, car and steel - because it has increased the demand for these products manyfold.

The gradual decline in public transport and the earlier style of near-to-home mixed-facility local shopping centres clustered around public transport stops has gradually been replaced by car-based work places, shopping marts, educational institutions and drive-in hotels.

This urban pattern also suits the large corporations investing in suburban housing estates and industrial parks, since their development can proceed with economy of scale and unhindered by the need for local public transport or proximity of local shops, child care or other facilities for social life.

Governments, banks and financial institutions with money for roads and express-ways, subsidies for home purchasers and ready finance for cars have facilitated this process aided by urban planners, transport planners, social planners and local government councillors intent on expanding "their" rate base.

The result has been a steady process of scattering the different components that have previously been clusters of mixed urban functions. This has created a tremendous advantage for cars, because of the randomness of destinations replacing the earlier cluster-to-cluster trips by public transport. The consequent need for car parking, which is so inherently incompatible with the older style busy urban life, tends to keep each of the now scattered functions separate.

Such redevelopments in the established areas as do now occur tend to be "megaprojects" - sky scraper offices, or enormous hotels, motels, marinas, and convention centres for top business executives or five-star visitors.

Apologists for the lifestyles that all this tends to enforce say that people prefer bigger houses on bigger blocks of land, despite the extra time taken for longer journeys. They point to statistics showing that most households have one two or three cars. They assume that the home entertainment of TV has largely displaced the need for personally-involving local activities, or even personally-involving home activities. They take it for granted that tourism based on "big wigs" is sound economic growth.

Danger

The danger is that all these trends are continued instead of being creatively changed by "alternative society" movement/parties, the disadvantages of the life style trends in the suburbs will come to far outweigh the advantages, making life more miserable instead of in any way satisfying and joyous.

The apologists overlook other statistics which show that about half the population cannot drive or have no car, so have no independent mobility. They overlook the decline in local personally-involving activities especially for women, children youth and elderly people. This often reduces the self-esteem of those concerned, a condition which rebounds on car drivers as well as those with no car because everyone in the household is cut off from easily accessible social and recreational life close at hand.

It overlooks the lack of companionship, the drug addiction, deviant behaviours and ill-health to which excess privatism and lack of self-esteem tends to give rise. And, seldom mentioned, is the misery caused families by the high toll of road accidents. Women especially take the main burden of all this, whether as victims or as carers of the victims.

Also overlooked is Australia's early depletion of its own oil reserves, and Australia's increasing integration with the "world car" plans of the multi-nationals, leading to an increasing dependence on these large corporations and on governments of other countries beyond Australia's control.

Moreover, of all the wasteful "Western" ways, city-design compelling over dependence on the car is, relative to the third world countries, the most extravagant, because this urban car-dependent mode of life uses cars not only for purposes for which they are ideally suited, say for random recreation trips, but also for regular every day trips to work, shopping and even education. Yet cars are the least energy efficient form of transport, are high consumers of resources needing frequent renewal, are heavy polluters and have absorbed, unnecessarily, a portion of the high post-war productivity of the Western countries which could have been used in so much better ways.

Weakness

The weakness of the alternative society movement is that it may advance fragments of a solution, such as more enlightened social policies, more varied and cheaper housing, better and cheaper public transport, opposition to inappropriately located mega-projects or to the pressures of high traffic volumes and parking, without realising that each part is not to be significantly changeable if tackled in isolation, but requires a comprehensive alternative city system of land-uses, transport, housing and social planning.

The Cluster and Connect City

Note on the terms :

We have adopted two terms "cluster" and "hub" to distinguish the cluster and connect concept from terms, which, in common usage, very often have ambiguous meaning, e.g. the word "centre" sometimes means an institution such as a "health centre" or a "youth centre", sometimes is given a much wider scope such as "a local shopping centre", and sometimes the central and busiest part of a shopping centre.

By "cluster" we shall mean a mixed-purpose people intensive place of whatever size which constitutes the urban (as distinct from the dormitory suburban) portion of a city. By "hub" we shall mean the busiest parts, closest to public transport stops at the heart of the cluster.

Alternative Society Goals (Long Term)

Central City Cluster - Excellence and Variety

- Further enriching the magnificent potential for inspiring and high-skilled culture - artistic, technological, sporting, educational, scientific, entertaining and recreacitonal - and the widest possible variety in all spheres made possible by the sheer number of people which the city has settled in the one place.
- Nurturing, assembling and popularising the most enlightened and humanising of these cultural efforts, and encouraging an increase in housing in and around the central cluster to overcome the "dead" period after working hours.
- Presenting to the public in the most accessible location - central area - the best and widest range of such achievements so that they are easily accessible no matter where people live, and are in the same general location as other all-city functions such as retail department stores, head offices, central government agencies, and small innovative enterprises of all types, commercial or not.

Neighbourhood Cluster - Congenial Involvement

- Encouraging a level of acquaintanceship among neighbours enough to establish an affable relationship between individuals and families of different outlooks and interests so they can appreciate each others values and contributions.
- Developing types of low key personally-involving mutual activities of a supportive or co-operative kind, such as child care, house and garden hints, social occasions and small co-operative or political efforts around neighbourd or block concerns.
- Establishing small, walking-distance, homely clusters consisting of a "neighbourhood house" or "community house" which can act as a focus, on neutral ground, to help the above process; and couple it with a small convenience-store and any other facilities favoured by neighbours (eg small laundrette, photocopier, word processor, post office agency etc) with both types of functions accommodated in the residential areas, in existing houses.

Local Cluster - Services and Activities

- Bringing together, in an intermediate size cluster, a range of performances and services similar to the central city cluster, but not all of top performances or unique quality, nor of such a comprehensive variety, but nevertheless providing an attractive mixed-purpose centre where nearby residents and employees can purchase, or participate in, most of their standardised weekly needs.
- Offering to the local residents served by this type of cluster, and to employees of commerce, industry and social services working in or near it, a range of more specialised activities than can possibly be expected from the much smaller human catchment at neighbourhood levels, and with special attention to youth activities, daytime activities for those not in the work-force and weekend and evening activities.
- Providing, as with the central city cluster, higher density dwelling units in, and immediately around, the local cluster for those who enjoy such living, to help enliven these urban parts by overcoming the "dead" periods of evenings and weekends.
- Planning, in the case of bigger cities, for a selected number of local clusters to grow to the size of a "district cluster" - a cluster of services and activities mid-way in size and function between the central cluster and local clusters to give citizens in the area served a much wider choice of goods and services and of activities than in their local cluster, but with a much shorter trip than going to the central cluster.

Connecting Clusters - Worthwhile Interchanges

- Giving all citizens the choice between affordable and get-at-able extremes : appreciation of central city excellence (with personal anonymity where so desired) at one extreme, or at the other, local relaxing personal involvement with friends and acquaintances - and all degrees of mixtures between these extremes - by a system of ready access to all levels of the hierarchy of clusters.
- Designing the metropolis or city according to cluster and connect principles of every neighbourhood clustering being a bus stop short walking distance from home; the bus or mini-bus providing an efficient shuttle service for passengers, prams and jeeps, and parcel deliveries to the nearest local cluster, and the local cluster connected by longer-haul buses (or by train, light rail or trams) to the other local or district clusters and the city cluster.
- Concentrating appropriate facilities within each of these levels of the hierarchy of clusters so that every interchange between one mode of travel and the next is a place that is not only comfortable, informative and convenient to pass through but a valuable space worth stopping at - with the emphasis on catering for supportive needs at the neighbourhood level, a wide choice of everyday staple needs and personally-involving activities at the local/ district level and outstanding variety and excellence at the central city level.

"Alternative Society" Strategies (Medium Term)

Understanding :-

(1) That every city has had an historically developed basic physical structure which has been very gradually re-shaped to accommodate the car-way-of-life, but only over several decades, and that only relatively minor re-adjustments are really needed to put cluster-and-connect principles into place, although this too must be by gradual stages, and...

2) That every city also has an entrenched social structure (apart from employers, employees and self-employed) also deriving from the car-way-of-life, which for the self-employed and employed needs as much re-arrangement as the physical, and...

3) That the cluster and connect restructuring would not affect people's continued use and enjoyment of their cars, or their homes, nor affect their jobs or special interests (except possibly to make more jobs or social interest available closer to home), then ...

The strategic direction of the "alternative society" movement should include :-

- Arresting further outward sprawl of any of Australia's bigger cities and diverting urban growth in the form of redevelopment at somewhat higher densities into selected mixed-purpose local (or district) clusters or the central city cluster, using public funds monies which would otherwise be needed for new roads, expressway systems, water, sewerage, gas, electricity, public buildings, libraries, bus services etc.

- Withdrawing permission in the established built-up areas for any manufacturing, retail, commercial or other labour-intensive non-residential land purposes in locations remote from any fixed rail systems, and directing them, where compatible, into selected local district or central clusters or, if incompatible, with such clusters, into industrial parks located on the long-haul public transport systems.

- Re-organising all bus routes to ensure that there are shuttle services of utility buses or mini-buses plying between neighbourhood clusters close to where people live, and the local or district clusters from all parts of the local or district catchments to be served by those clusters.

- Selecting from local shopping centres, those suitably distributed to grow into local or district clusters, and designing a master-plan for a hub for each cluster centred around the public transport interchange, and consisting of one core building or a complex of central buildings to accommodate, at medium density, a group of the most-frequently used facilities such as food stores, post office, banks, doctors, health clinics, chemist, library, cafeteria and premises for the most popular indoor pursuits; and make a start with the chosen master-plan.

- Relocating and/or establishing in local or district clusters offices for standardised government services (eg health, some educational, postal, library, galleries etc) and people involving non-commercial activities (e.g health, self-help groups, indoor fitness, sports, games,

recreation etc) helped with adequate numbers of funded "catalysts" (e.g people skilled not to "manage" activities on a permanent basis, but capable of getting others to get together around their special interests until they can manage their own activities.)

- Providing adequate numbers of funded catalysts to speedily establish enough neighbourhood houses until there is no part of a local cluster's catchment not covered by a neighbourhood cluster in "toddler's distance" of home, and no neighbourhood house that does not achieve a reasonable level of involvement from its neighbourhood catchment.

- Assisting all non-commercial centrally-organised and people-involving activities (e.g. films, drama, dancing, music, arts, crafts, hobbies, indoor sports, games etc) to promote their most promising practitioners from local or district level to the high-level central training and/or public performances.

Alternative Society Tactics (Short Term)

Without expecting too much too soon (because by its very nature, the task of changing relationships of the components part of a big city cannot be done suddenly, remembering that the entrenched habits of citizens are important factors as well as reluctance or indifference of authorities, and the hostility of some large corporations), encourage citizens in various ways and at various levels to support any moves that are in the direction of the above goals and strategies; and to oppose the continuation of trends that run counter to such goals and strategies.

There are so many obvious and not so obvious ways of doing this, that it would be misleading to pretend that any listing of tactical particulars could be more than illustrative of the sort of action that has been or could become popular.. a few ideas only, therefore, are presented below.

Naturally the most familiar examples are those in which protests have been stirred by provocative developments that have been perceived as threatening health, convenience, amenity, or control, but to strengthen the hand of protesters as well as disclosing threats less easily perceived, the alternative society movement, in conjunction with those affected, can help by evolving constructive alternative measures. So the tactical illustrations have been divided into :-

A) Re-active Protests" - (to stop the rot) " and...

B) "Constructive Directions - (towards cluster and connect) "

A) Re-active Protests - (to stop the rot) - Against :-

- 1) Plans for expressways, freeways, widening of arterial roads.
- 2) Rundown of public transport, e.g. less frequent, less safe, higher fares, close-down at night, weekends and holidays.
- 3) Demolition of previously useful buildings for off-street car-parking.

4) Plans for district-size car-based marts and supermarkets, very large hotels, with large parking areas, large drive-in cinemas, instead of smaller marts, cinemas and hotels at existing local or district level.

5) Profit-making, fee-paying child care centres, especially those depend on car access.

6) Primary schools beyond walking distance from scholars' homes and secondary schools and tertiary colleges not conveniently accessible by public transport.

7) New large housing estates or industrial parks isolated from the regular metropolitan-wide long-haul public transport system.

8) The existing location of local government offices, or the offices of decentralised State or Federal government departments or instrumentalities not sited in the proposed local or district clusters (e.g. employment offices, social security offices, gas office, post offices, welfare centres, municipal office, elderly citizens clubs and youth centres etc).

9) Mega projects inappropriately sited, such as high-rise luxury apartments, motels, offices or marinas, which are out-of-scale with residential or small business areas.

B) Constructive Directions - (towards cluster and connect) - for :-

1) Introducing mini-buses to the nearest local cluster that is connected by long-haul public transport to the central city cluster, or, if such services already exist, improving them by extending times of operation, frequencies and/or lower fares.

2) Getting together neighbours you know - initially, probably, mainly women not in the work force, with young children - meeting, as a start, in one or another's homes to campaign for some existing house to be acquired and to function initially, for mutual child care and any other mutually-supportive arrangements (see above); and demand funds that can make this possible, also the neighbourhood house to be at a bus-stop as in item 1 above.

3) Getting together any group keen enough on establishing or extending non-commercial, people-involving activities on a local area basis around particular sport, crafts, science, technology, education, indoor sport and games recreation etc and campaign to have suitable premises in the nearest local cluster; and, where necessary enough public funds for establishing premises and paying a catalyst.

4) Fostering forms of decentralisation of government and institutional services and facilities to local levels to give people more opportunities for management of affairs that affect them.

5) Demanding that the local municipal council (and at election time every candidate for election) draw up optional plans for consultation with local people covering all aspects of future local development, including adjusted and/or extended bus routes, expansion of public transport based clusters, with higher residential densities in and immediately around them, practical encouragement for varied activities in the local clusters, and for the

extension of the number of neighbourhood houses; and plans as to how to have these implemented.

Prospects and Sources

There may be experiences from other cities, but these "prospects" and "sources" are all from Melbourne.

Some cluster and connect principles were part-formulated by :-

- John Cain before he became premier of Victoria in 1983 (a 1979 paper "The Future of the Melbourne Metropolitan Area");
- The ALP election policies (1982);
- Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works - the then planning authority (in 1981 "Metropolitan Strategy Implementation" on Amendment 150 to the planning Scheme);
- The Ministry of Planning and Environment (in the August 1987 "Shaping Melbourne's Future")
- The Municipality of Melbourne (in City of Melbourne Strategy Plan 1973, and 1985 and proposed Implementation Amendment 453, 1987 which, however, failed to carry out the strategic objective of increased housing stock around the central hub).
- The Conservation of Urban Energy Group (the CUE Group) of the Conservation Council of Victoria (CCV) pioneered a more fully formulated alternative ... "cluster and connect" to these official versions all of which exhibit a "2 bob-each-way" weakness... allowing as much support for more car dependent growth as for more public transport-based city, instead of "affirmative action" capable of reversing the trends.
- The pioneering alternatives published by the 1978 CUE book "Seeds for Change" pp 143.. 249, followed up 1978 - 1987 by studies and reports by CUE and other plans for the metropolis and several suburbs, for example "The Nunawading Energy Study" and the North Melbourne report "More Enjoyment with Less Energy".

Summarising :

The battle for an alternative metropolis has been joined, prospects for planning an attractive "alternative society" has emerged, but adoption and implementation will involve a many sided effort against heavy odds weighed by investments of some of the world's largest corporations.

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All the documents mentioned in this paper are available in the Crow Collection. The Collection also has papers from a number of community seminars such as the 1987 "What Sort of City ?" seminar, and working papers from the preparation of "Seeds for Change", "The Nunawading Report" and "Less Energy with More Enjoyment".

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