

The Information Age City: A Bourgeois Utopian Dream

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Abstract:

Many cities are aspiring to be a world class, creative, global, high technology or an information age city. While these terms are urban theoretical constructions, they can also be seen as utopian ideals. The promise of the transformation of the declining industrial city to a 'high technology city or the achieving of any of the other classifications (i.e., World Class City) is beneficial to a relatively small group of any urban population (e.g. bourgeois). The unemployed, working urban poor and the under-employed are not inspired by the same vision of the realization of these types of cities. There are some academicians such as Richard Florida, who could be accused as modern day 'snake oil salesmen' promising city leaders that; 'they too can be a Creative City if they partake of his formula'. What is missing is a discussion on how this new 'City on a Hill' will benefit those that are not part of the new bourgeois (i.e., the urban poor, under-employed etc.). This paper will explore the information/creative/high technology city as developing utopian ideal, compare it with past urban utopian movements and discuss alternative visions for urban development.

Key Words: urbanization, utopian cities, information age cities, global cities, globalization, urban planning theories

Introduction

There would be little doubt that cities around the world are being transformed by the new forms of technology. If one examines the history of urban development, one of the key elements have been the role of technology particularly transportation and communication. Technology changes bring about dramatic changes in urban environments. With the result, urban theorists react and contemplate future realities. These can take the form of urban utopias or ideals.

The urban landscape is changing to the new forms of technology, particularly those in communication, such as the Internet. There is a plethora of terms and conceptual models to describe these emerging new urban forms. The urban form terms of the Edge City and exurbia are directly related to this evolving urban structure. The High Technology or the Information City is one that has surfaced recently. The Information Age-High Technology City (IAHTC) as defined as one where most of its residents work in fields that are related to education, consulting, banking, services, computer programming etc. (information) and those that work in high technology industries such as computer manufacturing, medical equipment etc. (technology) (2). Those involved in the arts and design (AKA the Creative Class as coined by Richard Florida (6)) would be considered as elements of both in some cases. This new city type is intimately linked to the concept of the New Economy (27).

While the IAHTC is a definition of a new urban form, it has also been developing into a utopian concept. It could be considered utopian because it is often compared to the Industrial Age City which is portrayed as grimy, polluted and repulsive. These cities would become the centers for the New Economy in this capitalist future. However, these concepts are inadequate to fully address what is happening in the interconnected global urban environment. These terms have given kudos for the academicians and journalists that coin them. They are rallying flags for city boosters and consultants who profit by devising plans based on these ill-formed ideas. Nevertheless, in this bandying about of terms and the proclaiming of this new bourgeois utopia, the vast majority of residents of cities are ignored. There is no 'city on a hill' for them. The new office buildings, the research parks and the residential enclaves for the Creative Class are visible reminders in the urban landscape that they are excluded from this new utopia. The abandoned factories, the deteriorating neighborhoods and vacant land filled with rubble are what are left of their vision and hope. This is acutely present in some of the old manufacturing centers such as Chicago, Detroit, Liverpool and Manchester. There are areas where warehouses have been gentrified for the new bourgeoisie or for offices. However, these do not give employment to those who lost their jobs due to the factories moving overseas or being downsized due to more efficient operation. All over the world, the urban poor are acutely aware that they are out-of-synch with the world economy. Those that are proponents of these utopian dreams purposely ignore this segment of the urban population.

In presenting the concept that the IATHC is a utopia concept, the author will briefly examine the progression of urban utopias during the 20th century, examine the IATHC as a utopia concept and suggest possible revisions to the concept

Utopian City concepts in the 20th Century

Three urban utopias were developed by Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. In one form or another, their visions were manifested in modern urban structure. Howard envisioned a system of “garden cities” surrounding a central city. The cities would be mostly self-contained and self-functioning (see Figure 1). The ideas of Howard developed into the Garden City movement with several cities built in the U.K. and the United States based on his concepts. The most noteworthy are Radburn, New Jersey, USA Reston, Virginia USA, Letchworth (UK) and Welwyn (UK). Radburn and Reston have been widely seen as models for urban development.

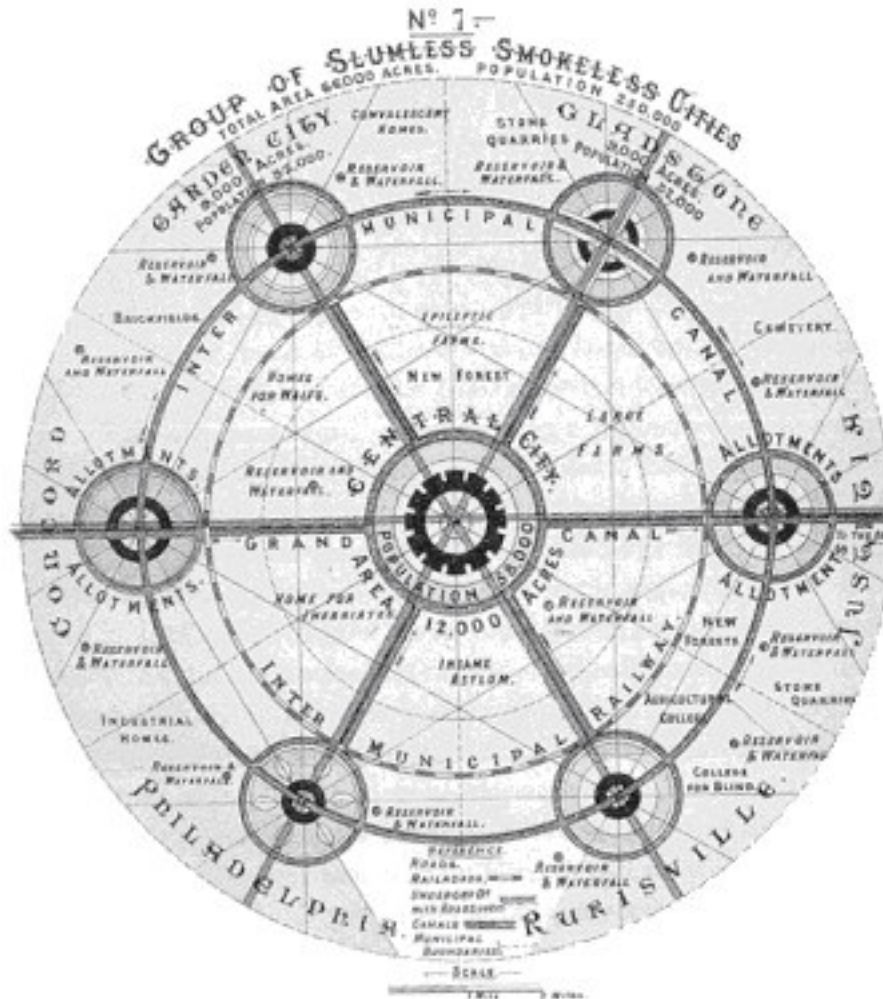


Figure 1: Howard's Vision of a System of Garden Cities

Lewis Mumford (20) states that the roots of Howard's 'Garden City' are from much early urban theorists such as Owen and Fourier. In his discussion on the root of Garden Cities, he states that the Garden City movement was a reaction to the pull of the cities from the rural population and the horrible conditions at this time. The Garden City offered decentralization and a rural character with moderate density. After the Second World War, the Greater London Plan incorporated many of the ideas that Howard espoused.

Le Corbusier's vision was one where the citizens would all be housed in high rises with

Central plazas. It would be ringed by multi-laned highways.

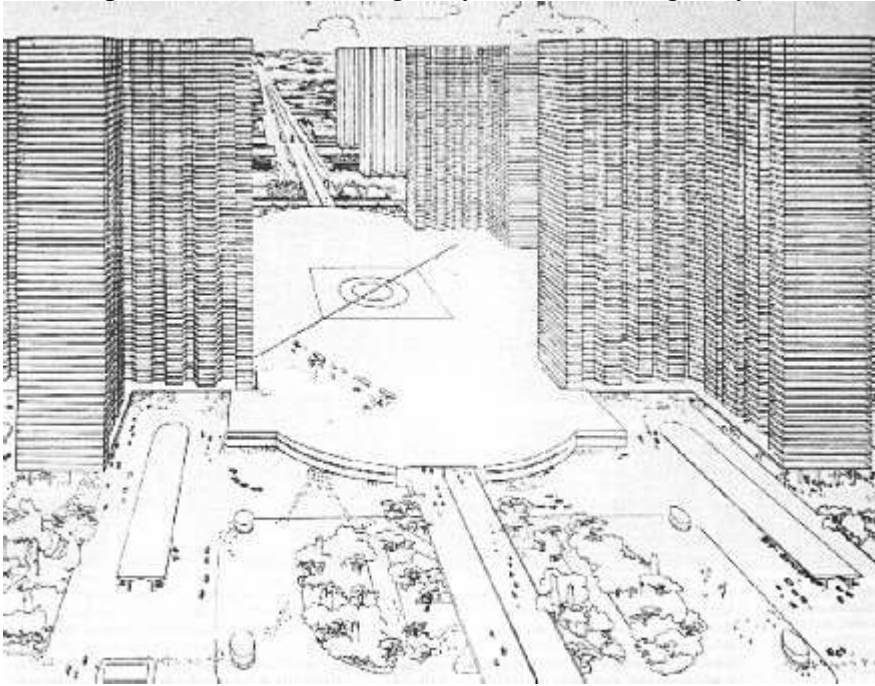


Figure 2: Le Corbusier's New City (15)

Frank Lloyd Wright proposed Broadacre City, which is a city of individual houses set in a semi-rural area. He stated in one of his lectures (13):

The broad acre city, where every family will have at least an acre of land, is the inevitable municipality of the future . . . We live now in cities of the past, slaves of the machine and of traditional building. We cannot solve our living and transportation problems by burrowing under or climbing over, and why should we? We will spread out, and in so doing will transform our human habitation sites into those allowing beauty of design and landscaping, sanitation and fresh air, privacy and playgrounds, and a plot whereon to raise things.



Figure 3: Wright's Broadacre City (11)

Robert Fishburn states that these three urban theorists brought with them three separate urban ideals that have been used by urban planners (5). Both these utopian ideals were primarily oriented toward North America and Western Europe. Now, they could be seen as global urban utopias.

New Urbanism, developed in the latter part of the last century, appears to be the anti-thesis of Broadacre City . It is the really only an extension of the ideas proposed by Howard (16). Those involved in New Urbanism advocate compact neighbors that are pedestrian friendly, use of public transportation.

In the latter part of the 20th Century there was another group that was advocating and sometimes attempting to realize their visions. These tend to have more in common with science fiction or technological fantasies as seen in Popular Science or in the 1964 Worlds Fair. are others that are advocating very far fetched urban utopias such as Victory City. On the webpage of Victory City, it is stated that. 'The age of the Victory City will be the perfect companion to the space age, the electronic age, the atomic age, the age of automation and the age of computers (28).'

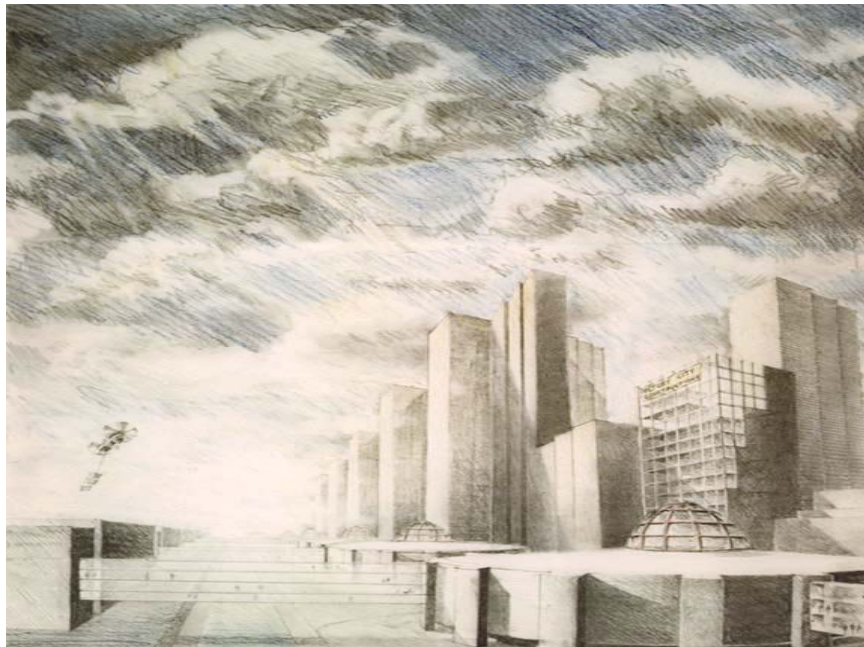


Figure 4: Illustration of Victory City (28)

Others such as Paolo Soleri with Arcosanti are advocating a ecological friendly city. A prototype of this city is being constructed in the desert near Phoenix, Arizona USA.



Figure 5: High-rise Megalopolis (1)

As the communications is becoming more prevalent, there are virtual communities developing. These are theorized to be taking on some of the characteristics of utopian thinking (28).

The Information Age City as a Utopian Ideal and the Digital Divide

How does all this relate to a utopian ideal of the Information Age City? This is just a utopian as all others. The difference is that no one has exactly defined what this would be like. One could say that IAHTC would be one where there would be: 1) no manufacturing or light manufacturing 2) no pollution, 3) a large creative community, 4) a large number of employed in the arts, information management, research, academia, web page design, consulting, etc. , 5)a university,6) research institution, 7) a vital central city, 8) low impact transportation (public transportation, pedestrians, bicycles etc.), and 9)compact development. This has been termed the Creative City by some such as Richard Florida (1).

Many cities have started to repeat the mantra of the IAHTC. Recently, the Mayor of Paris was in San Francisco to attend the tenth anniversary of the establishment of a city sister program between the two cities. He stated that he must drag Paris into the next century (23). It was an obvious example of San Francisco being the model IAHTC. Toronto, Canada has hopes to be an IAHTC as well (12). It is claimed that over 100,000 persons work in the sector. However, there is growing completion from other cities and nations in the developing world.

These cities are attempting to ‘rebrand’ themselves from one of cities of the industrial age and one of the information age. However, these policies favor the middle and upper classes and large corporations. Manuel Castells, one of the first to recognize the IAHTC states (3):

By informational city, I understand an urban system with sociospatial structure and dynamics determined by a reliance of wealth, power, and culture, on knowledge and information processing

in global networks, managed and organized through intensive use of information/communication technologies. By dual city, I understand an urban system socially and spatially polarized between high value-making groups and functions on the one hand and devalued social groups and downgraded spaces on the other hand. This polarization induces increasing integration of the social and spatial core of the urban system, at the same time that it fragments devalued spaces and groups, and threatens them with social irrelevance.

He suggests that cities can use technology to benefit all its citizens. He suggests several strategies for this to be done such as city government encouraging entrepreneurship using the Internet, use of “telecenters” where people can work part-time on using telecommunications, and the use of specialized local media to create community. In his vision, cities need not accept the growing divide due to telecommunications, but use it incorporate those into the Information Age. Graham (8) further states that the communications network in urban areas is polarizing urban areas, but suggests that government policies such as establishing places with free Internet access such as found in libraries and public education programs can mitigate these disparities.

Alternative Vision-The Sustainable City

A concept which has prevailed in urban planning theory in the last 10 years is that of the sustainable city. This could be considered a utopia concept (25). The idea of the sustainable city is that a city will not overburden the environment for future generations. The most widely accepted definition of sustainability was formulated in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development in a report entitled “Our common future”. This statement is generally referred to as the Brundtland Report (24). It should be noted that the ideas of a sustainable city is being operationalized with the development of a GIS geared toward tools so that cities can be sustainable (7).

Discussion

How do we link all these concepts together? There is obviously fragmentation in the concepts being expressed. Utopian city concepts are developed in response to the manifestation of problems and technology changes in the urban environment. Howard’s Garden City movement was response to the lack of green space in the cities and overcrowding. Wright’s Broadacre City and Le Corbusier saw technology in different manners. Wright saw technology as a liberating element to make a rural-urban paradise. Le Corbusier saw high-rise apartments as making more room for green space and separation of automobiles and pedestrians. The technologies that Wright and Le Corbusier saw as a force for positive change have been distorted so that suburbs are monotonous and enclaves for the middle class, high rises crowd together to use all available space with few amenities. Howard’s vision has been amalgamated in the New Urbanism movement which has created only a few examples and then only in the exclusive development. Simpson and Soleri’s utopias are examples of the influences of the IAHTC. However, they are very futuristic and can not be considered as contributing to urban theory.

The IAHTC as a utopian ideal is a bourgeois concept which is in the process of being developed. The utopian concepts of the 20th Century has not disappeared. These two concepts are developing in conjunction with each other. There is not a clear link between the IAHTC and the 20th Century utopian cities. While the IAHTC is a utopian concept, it

only offers value to the city booster, consultants and academics. Utopias are visions to guide urbanization. The 20th Century utopians greatly influenced urban theory. While the IAHTC may be a utopian concept and also an urban construct, it has not inspired any substantial urban theory. Urban planners and theorists must go beyond describing the IAHTC and develop realistic and workable 'utopias' to guide development in this transitional period.

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