

Articles

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The Role of Small Cities

INTRODUCTION A

by Dr. Edgar L. Harden President, Northern Michigan University Marquette, Michigan Co-Chairman, Operation Action, U-P

The privilege of introducing our internationally known speaker is to be given to a distinguished American and one who is an international figure in his own right. Walker L. Cisler, who is to be the recipient of an honorary degree later in this program, is a long-time friend and colleague of our visitor from Athens, Greece. Mr. Cisler also is an insightful and faithful friend of the Upper Peninsula and her people. He has given of himself far beyond the call of duty in an effort to help us find ways of improving the economy of this area. His efforts have borne and will continue to bear fruit. To present him to the graduates, their parents and friends, and the faculty of Northern Michigan University is a great honor and privilege.

INTRODUCTION B

by Walker L. Cisler Chairman of the Board, The Detroit Edison Company Detroit, Michigan Co-Chairman, Operation Action, U-P President Harden, Members of the Board of Control, Members of the Faculty, Distinguished Guests, Graduates of the Class of '65, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am happy indeed to have the privilege of introducing to you a man who is known throughout the world as an original and outstanding architect, planner of cities and regions, engineer and teacher. Because of him, millions live in more wholesome environments today and many millions more will do so in the future. He is truly a builder of the future.

I have known Constantinos Doxiadis since 1948 when we worked together on the reconstruction of Greece with Marshall Plan assistance. Since that time our paths have crossed frequently in many parts of the world where great developments are under way to raise living standards through, in part, the application of energy, technology, and understanding to the economic life of nations.

He has traced the development of cities through history and understands the importance of urban life in human culture today and the even greater role that it will have in the near future.

In the past, cities and communities have been built up with limited concern for fulfilling the needs and aspirations

of great numbers of people living and working together. Frequently, long range situations have been generated through inadequate planning and rebuilding programs. Paths have become streets, streets have become highways, but seldom has there been the vision and understanding to plan for large communities and regions on a comprehensive, long-range basis. This is the life work of Constantinos Doxiadis and the organization of which he is president, Doxiadis Associates, which has its home base in Athens, Greece. This organization is established also in West Germany, Spain, Pakistan, England, Lebanon, Sudan, Ghana, Brazil, Libya and the United States.

He has planned village and urban developments in more than twenty-two nations on four continents. Among his major projects are the expansion of Baghdad; the design of Islamabad, the new capital of Pakistan; the Eastwick Urban Renewal project in Philadelphia; his work for Washington, Louisville, Cincinnati, and Miami, to name a few.

Of particular concern to us is the project announced last March to analyze and plan for the most effective future development of Southeastern Michigan, an area that is clearly becoming outlined as a center of tremendous growth during the coming generations. This, in turn, will have a most significant effect upon Michigan as a whole as means of high speed transportation come into common use and the great resources of the total area are increasingly developed. It is certain to have its impact on the Upper Peninsula and all for the better.

This five-year study program is sponsored by The Detroit Edison Company in collaboration with Wayne State University and others and brings to that area of our State the services of Doxiadis Associates and The Athens Technological Institute, which has as its chairman of the board, our distinguished guest today. The institute draws from all parts of the world students who seek to learn about city and regional planning on a scale suitable for the great needs of the future. Our guest lectures there at the graduate level, and his concepts have influenced many architects and city planners, both by his personal example and through his skill in making these matters clear and relevant to the listener. Thus, he is a master teacher.

We are most fortunate, indeed, to have the opportunity today to hear directly the thoughts of this remarkable man who has served his nation so well in peace and war, and who is doing so much for the world at large. It is with great pleasure that I introduce to you my very esteemed friend, Constantinos Doxiadis

President Harden, Members of the Graduating Class:

For the last four days I had the opportunity to visit the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, fly over it, drive on its roads,

walk through its cities and meet and talk to its citizens. I have not become an expert on this area, but I have formed an impression which may be of some interest to you and may have some importance for all of us.

My impression is that while in the big and growing cities of the world man is overwhelmed by their dimensions and their dynamic growth, in the Upper Peninsula some people inquire themselves whether the small size of the cities -a simple way to speak of the small numbers of people and the small enterprises, as well as the lack of dynamic growth- do not herald the beginning of an era of stagnation which may gradually lead to their abandonment and death. I think that we must explore such an important question.

The Evolution of our Cities

For thousands of years man lived as a nomad; some eleven to twelve thousand years ago he settled down in order to cultivate his land, and then created his villages. Later, some five to six thousand years ago he built his cities as the centers of commerce and crafts, administration and defense, arts and religion.

This situation has lasted for long centuries until the scientific, technological and industrial revolutions created a big change in our living conditions. Some cities in key locations broke their walls in every way; their population started rising into the hundreds of thousands and then into millions; industry expanded in and around them; many important functions and many bad habits developed into them. These are the dynamic cities of the last two hundred years seen with admiration by some and by some others with fear.

What is going to happen to these dynamic cities? Are they going to continue growing, and are they on their march to absorb the entire population of the earth and all our vitality until they, alone, and nothing else is going to exist?

Can we and are we entitled to predict their future? I think that we are not only entitled to, but also compelled to do so, because if we do not we deprive ourselves of the right to see where we are going. Thus we doom ourselves to move in the darkness, perhaps even toward our disaster. But can we succeed in predicting the future? The ancient Greeks said that "only God knows the future; but wise men can see the tomorrow."* This "tomorrow" can for many phenomena be extended to several generations. We can reasonably predict them, and there is no reason why the fear of the unpredictable should deter us from predicting the predictable.

If we do so, then we will find that the population of the earth, our economy and knowledge are going to explode in

the future even more than in the past. The new population and the new forces are going to inflate the existing major cities and spread along the main lines of transportation as well as in the best areas for the habitation of man, mainly near the sea and the lakes.

Thus the major dynamic cities are gradually going to be interconnected into a continuous network of built-up areas which, in the second part of the 21st century, is going to cover the entire earth with a net-like city, the Universal city of man, the Ecumenopolis, with a probable population of ten to thirty billion people, or ten to thirty times larger than the present total urban population of the world. This city is already under construction and development, and we can see its first branches in the eastern part of the U.S.A., in western Europe, eastern China and Japan. The city takes shape all around major cities, and we can almost see Detroit extending its branches merging with Chicago, Cleveland and Pittsburgh, giving birth to the Great Lakes Megalopolis within this present century.

The Fate of the Small Cities

If these predictions are right, as they seem to be, what then is going to be the fate of the small cities? We have those close to the big ones and some on the main highways of the country, which are going to be absorbed by the expanding Universal City. There are others, however, outside the Ecumenopolis, which cannot be touched by it. Are these latter ones going to survive?

All indications show that they will. When villages were first created, nomadic settlements did not cease to exist -it took them thousands of years to decrease and even today there are many nomads in the world. When the first cities were created, villages did not disappear the greatest part of the population of the world still lives in them. And when dynamic cities were born older static ones did not disappear either - they still exist today. Thus on the basis of historical experience as well as on the basis of present facts, we can predict that the small cities are going to continue being alive. As a whole, and for the immediate future, they will probably retain the same population, others gaining, some keeping the same, and some others losing people. This is not the problem for small cities as a whole!

The real problem is what quality the small cities are going to have. Are they going to keep special characteristics and thus their own quality, or are they going to be miniatures of the big cities with all their weaknesses -but due to size-without their strength. This is the question: a question of quality on which the welfare, the happiness, and in the long run, the very existence of the small cities depends. If small cities are not going to have quality, they will be gradually abandoned by their best inhabitants; and then in

the long run, they will disappear.

Crisis in the Big Cities

If we think, however, that small cities can survive by developing their own quality in order to overcome the deficiency of size, we must understand which qualities a city loses by becoming dynamic and large. If we want to understand this properly, we must express it in values related to man himself.

The elements of nature are spoiled in the vicinity of the big cities; the air is contaminated (a second cause of lung cancer), the waters polluted, plants, flowers and birds cannot survive. We take the contaminated air out of our buildings and we breathe it in the streets when we go for a stroll.

We develop networks of transportation which do not make any sense. As an example, I will mention that although our machines now develop higher speeds, we lose more time commuting; and thus we provide, within the big cities, worse service to man. The situation is such that we can express it by a law which resembles Parkinson's laws. In practice: the higher the speed of the means of transportation man is developing in every period, the longer it takes him to reach the center of his big cities.

Our buildings lose their interest for us. This is why we see many of them down-town in a very bad condition while people still take care of the inside only. And why should we be interested in total architecture

when virtually we cannot see the buildings and enjoy them (as they are in the middle of parking lots), at the risk of being run over by cars while we are looking at them?

Our community does not function properly as can be understood by the difficulties we witness when we want to see our friends, as frequently as we desire, or to attend functions that all members of a family want to.

In the middle of this city man suffers even if he does not understand it, as he is gradually tamed. His suffering starts with his breathing and hearing, extends to what he sees and smells, and it is maximized by the fact that he is not free to move around. For the first time in the human history it is safer to be in the countryside than in the city. In the past the safest place on earth was the center of the city; now it is the most dangerous both during the day and night.

This situation, which works against man's interests, is intensified with every day that passes. Man and his civilization are faced within the big cities with a crisis!

The Value of the Small Cities

In the light of such a statement, we can now ask ourselves what is the value of the small cities. Why do we defend them quite often? Is it because they are small and need defense or is it a matter of social policy? These explanations do not make any sense at all. I think that arguments in favor of small cities are justified because they have a value for their own inhabitants, a value for those of the big cities, and a value for our entire population and civilization.

Their value for their own inhabitants is quite apparent: if they provide shelter, employment and community life of a quality not available in the big cities, because of their deficiencies, then they do have a great value for their inhabitants.

Their value for the population of big cities is due not only to the services which they provide for them, for example as centers of primary production, but also due to the fact that they do preserve human values which are gradually being lost within big cities. This is a very important factor which is almost always overlooked: at a moment of a great crisis due to the development of Ecumenopolis for which we are not prepared, it is in small cities that certain values can be preserved. Let us not forget that our big cities are in such a crisis that we do not know whether they will be saved - although I myself believe that they can be saved. In case humanity fails in big cities, our survival is entirely based on the small ones.

Finally, their value for the entire population and civilization is due to the fact that we all depend on a very complicated system consisting of an enormous number of human settlements, ranging from the largest to the smallest ones. We cannot allow any part of it to disintegrate without endangering our possibilities for survival. How do we know that big cities can survive without small ones? It has never happened before and we are not allowed to let it happen now without being aware of the repercussions to our welfare.

Quality as our Goal

Big cities and with them humanity as a whole face a grave crisis. Small cities are therefore of great value to all of us, for our survival. Their value and survival mainly depend on their quality. If small cities instead of keeping their own quality try to imitate big ones (as many of them try to do today) then they are doomed to decline, and this will be harmful to everybody.

Quality should be our goal in small cities, quality and excellence; not size and dynamic growth as these have not been properly met in big cities, and thus they have caused all the trouble. The structure and the form of small cities

should express their role, the idea which they have to serve. "There is a right physical size for every idea," Henry Moore said about sculpture; and this is true of human settlements too.

How do we achieve this quality though, how do we express the idea? We must turn to the deficiencies of the big cities which cause their lack of quality and should try to avoid them.

We have to keep our natural resources intact. We cannot afford to let factories contaminate the air, or the city's waste pollute the waters; nor can we allow commercial signs to spoil our landscape just as it is spoiled in big cities, because for the small ones beauty of landscape and intact non-spoiled nature are basic resources.

We should physically develop small cities in a way minimizing transport. We should once again give them an architectural scale and make them beautiful. We have to organize their functions in order to provide the best services to all members of the community as well as to the visitors of all classes and incomes.

But above all we must give back to small cities the human scale which they are tending to lose by imitating the big ones. Distances are such that people can walk within the city, and we have to help them to do that. When man begins to walk in outer space, he should not lose the opportunity to walk in his cities! The human scale is not a value for which we must visit the colonial cities in order to find it. It is necessary and it is possible for man to re-create it. We can first re-establish it into the small cities.

We should not forget that we are gradually losing our legs and turning into centaurs - half men and half cars. Why should we not walk in the small cities?

This morning I went for a walk from my hotel, through the campus, and back to my hotel. During one hour and a half I met only one person walking, a boy with his small dog, who was probably walking for the sake of the dog. It is interesting to notice that when he saw me, he stepped down on to the street, from the sidewalk on which we were both walking, and looking back suspiciously he only continued walking on the sidewalk twenty yards behind me. He was probably taught to distrust pedestrians. Have we reached this stage?

Quality is much more indispensable to small cities; it is a condition for survival; and it is much easier to be achieved in them than in big cities.

Are we able, however, to give quality to our small cities and achieve these requirements? Are we able to make our small cities human once again thus giving them the quality

and excellence which belong to them? I firmly believe that we can!

Whether this will be achieved depends on the people of areas like the Upper Peninsula, on institutions like the Northern Michigan University, on those to be active in the next 35 years, that is on the young men and women like you, of this graduating class, who will take over the baton of the big relay in a few years and will keep it until the end of the century.

Members of the graduating class, the generations which have preceded you have created many great things which you will inherit, but they failed to face the problem of better cities for man. The big cities are choked to death. The small ones are in danger of stagnation. We now begin to see our failures, developing new approaches; but yours is the task of action as in a few decades it will be too late for the small cities and for the values which they represent.

You still have the time and you can act in order to create a new balance between big and small cities, a balance which we all need!

This morning while I was walking, I heard a choir singing, and I entered a church. It was full, and there was no place for me to sit. I went back into the streets and started walking again. Then I remembered the thoughts of a great man, a scientist and a mystic, the words of father Teilhard de Chardin in the Ordos desert: "Since once again, Lord - though this time not in the forests of Aisne but in the steppes of Asia- I have neither bread, nor wine, nor Altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it I will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world."

As I am not a priest and I was not in a church, as I am a bricklayer and a builder having a small city in front of me, I walked through its streets and prayed for your success in this great task that you inherit from the previous generation, to build better cities for man, the small and the big, in a new balance.

References

1. Philostratus, Flavius, Life of Apollonius, Book VIII, Chapter VII.