

# What means a „good place“ for a „good life“? Can “good planning” do without these notions?

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## The importance of a “good place” to live in

As human being each of us cannot do better than strive for what the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle called a “good life”. The constitution of the USA is famous for acknowledging this by granting the “pursuit for happiness” to everybody. Wisely, the document leaves the content of “happiness” to everyone’s own choice provided that this pursuit does not any other’s “happiness”. In my limited perspective as a planner (and those of you from the same stable might agree) I hold that this “pursuit of happiness” embraces a “good place” to live in.

What makes a “good place” to live in? First, it means a physical environment inside the “comfort quadrangle”. This may slightly differ individually. Human beings seem to be able to tolerate fairly extreme conditions. Heat, moisture, frost, threat from contagion and torments may be endured as long as the physiological limits for reproduction are not transgressed in terms of biology and horde solidarity. The latter points to the second condition: A “good place” means “good” neighbours who shield the individual against most outside risks, and leave room for individual self-determination. The assessment of a given setting can be specific for each person and even change during life-time. What elderly inhabitants regard as a heaven of security, young people may see as a prison. (This is a human characteristic: in everybody’s life there is a period just after puberty which lures one away from home – young men more than women.) Any time one is free to draw the balance: The more a given location offers the feeling to be in command of one’s life, the more an individual feels attached to a given place. The overwhelming majority of people opt for a given locality and praise it freely. Of course, there are many and strong reasons for migration, but most of it is forced. However, this is another subject.

There have always been travellers, wandering monks and others who shy away from any local or community commitment. Are these wanderers but rationalizing a kind of personal mental deformation? I have argued elsewhere that the academic way of life and that of intellectuals in general predisposes them to abandon the basic attachment to a locality <sup>1</sup>. Could it be that the celebration of life in a virtual space has the same roots?

## Why to shy away from planning a “good place”?

In professional debates, in research etc. on the physical and social side of human settlement, there is a penchant in favour of units “on the green grass”, as we in Germany say. The model is a pre-human instinct: vertebrates are disposed to build a nest, a burrow, a hide for their after-grown and, human beings at least, seem to have a tendency for colonizing. It is only now as grand-father, that I, when I observe my children in search for a nest of their own, become aware, how much people at this stage of life unconsciously look for an environment offering security and continuity, a neighbourhood. And I realize more than my children do, that the world is parcelled, that there is ownership everywhere and local community in command of rules to be followed and preconditions to be satisfied.

By looking at what has been published more recently on the subject and what is on the agenda of this conference, I get the impression that all this is not really reflected. (Incidentally, at the foundation of town-planning as a profession, there was much more acknowledgement of togetherness and roots in the past - see the writings of John Ruskin, of Ebenezer Howard's "Cities of Tomorrow" etc.) The title of this conference (just an example of many) has made me suspicious. "*Assessing and exploring the state of urban knowledge: its production, use, and dissemination in cities of the South*" **What is "urban" knowledge? Is it in contrast to "rural" knowledge?**

In your call for papers I read "... tensions arising between efficiency and equity, on the need for differentiated approaches to urban growth .... on the socio-spatial consequences of development interventions" **Interventions by whom? Who feels tensions between efficiency and equity?** Furthermore you want to look at "*Knowledge production, use and dissemination are central to urban practitioners' and researchers' progressively improved understanding of the urban domain/realm in the global South.*" **But to what end?** "*new producers and users of knowledge and new agencies*" **Are the producers and users really new and again: knowledge to what end?** The call mentions "*public learning' ... from the cross-fertilisation between urban research and practice (...)* ?" "*past thinking and ideologies, models, strategies, programmes and approaches to the appreciation and subsequent management of urbanisation in the South (... of) characteristics and consequences in terms of regulation, financing, institutional reforms, improved and equitable access, urban growth, socio-spatial equilibriums, etc.*" **What about ideologies, models, strategies and their perilous shortfalls in the North?**

Most of the papers submitted to this conference seem - assessing from the abstracts - to look through the eyes of assistants in the service of intervening agents, i.e. the State or developers, sometimes affirmatively, often critically. They seem to neglect, however, that since long, alternative models, strategies, programmes and approaches have been proposed. Would it not be better, instead of re-inventing the wheel, to analyze, why many of these efforts have run into difficulties or have worked, if at all, only in parts? And if they were successful, which can be proved in many instances, why did they not spread and became even threatened in the long run? <sup>2</sup>

Is it the spirit of colonization which causes neglect or even disregard of what exists or taking it as a matter to be cleared or recycled instead of appreciating it as material and resource for improvement? It is really technical knowledge which is lacking in the first place. In times of climate change and of finance markets going crazy, it is the knowledge, intelligence and political will necessary to defend their neighbourhoods against deterioration and to organize themselves which lacks or is demeaned. For this end, I hold, neighbourhoods need self-confidence based on a vision of what is a good place for a good life.  
demeaned

### **Examples of "good places" to live in**

As long as I was practicing, I was convinced, that ideas, arguments and some pressure of the people by means of "participation" would be sufficient to improve their lives. It took me years, certain incidents, and conscious identification with the locality and the community I now live in, to understand that to defend a community is more than assisting meetings and discuss public issues "from below".

### **The European local community model**

I learned much in 2005 from my second visit of the *cite radieuse* in Marseille. This is a block of 300 flats by the famous architect Le Corbusier built in 1945. At my first visit in 1955 I found the building in a deplorable state. In fact, it was considered already for demolition. Fifty years later I saw it literally resurrected. You may study it on internet

and even look for accomodation in a Le Corbusier style small hotel<sup>3</sup>. I should mention that my fondness of Le Corbusier is ambiguous. Certain emanations of spatial composition, of material and of texture, of the use of light etc. are overwhelming. But I dislike the bed-of-Procrustes-like elements of his, the Modulor, his totalitarian vision of Paris, the hierarchical lay-out and access system of Chandigarh, his sun-breakers when they do not face the south as he made believe his audience, his admiration of people in power etc. But a certain aura goes with his creations in Chandigarh and in the *cit  radieuse* at Marseille. This aura makes the present inhabitants of the *Unit  d'Habitat* and even of Chandigarh to instigate a kind of self-government claiming to follow Le Corbusier's spirit, although he had never clear ideas about it. Still, the *Unit  d'Habitat* of Marseille became a model for a self-governed neighbourhood.

Since my visit in 1955, two things had happened: First, the building was classified as a protected monument and thus became eligible for public rehabilitation funds; and second, a few enthusiasts of Le Corbusier's architecture created institutions capable of managing the rehabilitation. A tenant co-operative, later the owners' co-op was established to organise the letting and selling of the flats, giving preference to young couples who showed concern for the building and were prepared to participate in a kind of self-government. The building has turned into an aesthetical show piece, a show piece controlled by the habitants of which they are proud to show off their fondness. The visiting tourists on their architectural pilgrimage foster this feeling in a kind of mutually self-assuring process.

The key to this all is the association of inhabitants, visible in its periodically convened assembly, its elected representatives and service units (a *conciergerie*, exhibition and event management, specialized technical facility units etc.) controlled by corresponding committees, and the full routine of a political body shaped according to a municipal government, albeit much smaller and thus in the reach of the habitants. There is a transparent set of rules to guide improvement and defend against deterioration. The coherence which governs the community seems to create a high degree of solidarity which in turn translates into a feeling of security and defence against outside risks.

### **The Oriental Mohalla model**

Something roughly comparable can be found in the South of New Delhi. Outb Minar is a tourist attraction with a famous 500 years old Minaret and some impressive restored temples or mosques. Just outside the tourist area and thus benefiting from this vicinity, some architects, art teachers and other intellectuals had taken the lead and created a kind of neighbourhood association similar to that of Marseille. But a closer look revealed some significant differences. There was a general assembly with elected representatives staffed by the most versatile inhabitants, but the formalities of the community were fairly loose. The general operations and the specifically technical ones were rather based on acclamation and informal approval respectively lack of refutation. Formal accountancy and answerability towards a general public seem to be missing.

Most important: the women of the community seem to play the role which women in such neighbourhoods always play. They keep the community together by creating a kind of neighbourhood conviviality grounded in the life of the families. The community puts it even on display to a certain degree. But exactly this makes formalities which are the domain of the male members of the neighbourhood rather unnecessary. In this respect the Outb Minar neighbourhood is comparable to many well functioning mohallas in New Delhi, in other cities of India and beyond. In fact, Outb Minar is an example of a "good" ward as can be found in the entire Orient. There is a vast literature on this model of the "oriental ward". Take the Tales of 1001 Nights and you get the feeling for it. Innumerable novelists have depicted this world, of which Salman Rushdie with his "Midnight Children" is certainly not the last. Impressive studies of anthropologists and sociologists are available<sup>4</sup>. The separation of the world into the cosy world of family, children, household etc. and the cold exterior world where men

have to fight makes this pattern vulnerable. Solidarity and care is with the women who are not supposed to report and be held accountable. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to earn the family's living outside in a hostile male world and to defend their home, individually or as part of a neighbourhood. They are not answerable towards the women and in any case keep a distance to the inner world of the ward once they have passed puberty.

In modern times however, the traditional strategies of defence have become obsolete. Still, men are not responsible for the female world. But both have their own and probably different images of the future in minds - for the home or for the neighbourhood. And these reflect haphazard elements from commercial publicity - Hollywood or Bollywood. Hence these neighbourhoods cannot defend themselves against attacks neither from a deteriorating environment nor from aggressive economic ventures. Bad is not the model as such but its vulnerability against outside disturbances.

### **The African village**

A village as a settlement unit in a wide sense is not confined to rural areas. In this loose sense one may speak of "villages" to be found in New York, Tokyo, in any bigger town. "Village" means simply "neighbourhood". It is an ubiquitous phenomenon. Yet the "African village" may be described more specifically. In its female conviviality it resembles the Oriental neighbourhood, insofar as men have the task to represent and defend the cluster of families which compose a neighbourhood. But the typical African village from the Sudanese Belt to Botswana, from Sierra Leone to Madagascar are distinguishable from those neighbourhoods by the fact that they fulfil a kind of subsistence function. Urban gardening and even agriculture, rather an exception in oriental wards, is common, even essential for African neighbourhoods. In this, women play an important role, although gardening is not strictly reserved for them.

This means that male and female worlds are not as separated as they are in the Oriental societies. Fairly common, however, is that young men have a tendency to roam and migrate for a number of years to often geographically and culturally distant places far away and return only after that to their family and neighbourhood. This makes the women fairly independent and causes them to behave more outward-oriented. Feeling more responsibility for the children than their husbands, women are less prone to corruption prevailing in the male sphere and, particularly, in the male politician world. This is where the "African villages" are specifically threatened. But there is a recent and still timid development, where women take the lead. .

### **How to make a good life fit in a good place?**

I am aware that my remarks on the three models of neighbourhoods are quite sweeping and not conclusive at all. It was my aim to open a perspective beyond all the technical issues which certainly will be tackled by others on this conference. I think that the challenge of the future lies in coping with the increasing environmental degradation and in fighting against the attacks of so many economic powers which become more and more auto-immune on the other hand. Representative agents of this threat are bio-technological enterprises, oil-driven corporations, Chinese enterprises etc. are. .

All these do not care about a "good place" to live in, they are blind and deaf for the very idea of a "good life" with respect to any human being. Yet, is it a reason to abandon the perspective completely? And if not, how else could it be achieved but in small neighbourhoods?

To end my sketchy presentation of the three models of neighbourhood, I would like to point to a kind of synthesis. The strength of the African village in its affinity to

self-sufficiency might in future be needed for reasons of sustainability. It could be combined with the Oriental pattern in its predilection for emotional satisfaction. But the ideal of neighbourhood as a whole can only be defended by following the European model, because of its rationality and potential for self-reflection and learning.

Aristotle as one of the founders of European reflection in philosophy and politics was the first to spell out the perspective of a "good life" for the individual, but also in relation to the community. His ideas are not only still alive, they continue to be of importance to the human society as a whole. Philosophers of our times translate them into key words such as solidarity, human rights, autonomy of the individual, legitimacy in and sovereignty, i.e. self-rule of a local community. <sup>5</sup>.

## Endnotes

1 Jürgen Oestereich (2010) The Construction of the Urban. Cultural Evolution and the Asymmetry of Power; in: TRIALOG 102/3: 81-85

2 Not the origin, but the first big push came with John Turner. I shall just quote a selection of the more important papers and books leading to the very first issue of the Journal TRIALOG, of which I am one of the editors. The subject is still under debate, however, tends at "re-inventing the wheel".

John F.C. Turner (1965) Lima's Barriadas and Corralones: Suburbs versus Slums; in: Ekistics 112

Lisa R. Peattie (1968) The View from the Barrio, Ann Arbor (Univ.of Michigan.Press)

A.A. Laquian (1968) Slums are for People; Manila (Island Publishing)

Office de Recherche et de Technologie d'Outre Mer (1971) Résultats de l'enquête par sondage des îlots de Pikine (Grand Dakar) 1967-69 ; Paris/Dakar (ORSTOM)

Omar Akbar (1983) Medina Sadam al Tawrah: Ein Beiapiel für die Instandsetzung eines Wohnquartiers in Bagdad; in: TRIALOG 1: 31-33;

Jürgen Oestereich (1987) Upgrading a Squatter Community: Some conclusions drawn from the Kalingalinga Project, Lusaka; in: TRIALOG 13/14: 30-35

3 <[www.marseille-citeradieuse.org](http://www.marseille-citeradieuse.org)> <[www.hotellecorbusier.com](http://www.hotellecorbusier.com)>

4 Just a few famous examples: Geneviève Tillon (1966) Le harem et les cousins, Paris (Seuil)  
Pierre Bourdieu (1972) Esquisse d'une théorie des la pratique, précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle, Genève

Geertz,C. et al. (1982) Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society; Cambridge (Cambridge UP)

5 Two authors stand for the revival of the political approach of Aristotle:

Hanna Arendt (1998) The Human Condition; Chicago (University of Chicago Press)

Martha C. Nussbaum (2001) Women and Human Development; Cambridge (Cambridge UP)

