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# Imagineering Cities: Creating Liveable Urban Futures in the 21st Century

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# **Imagineering cities – creating liveable urban futures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

**Professor John Ratcliffe, Elzbieta Krawczyk**

## **Abstract**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is fast being recognised as the ‘century of cities’. More than half of the world’s population lives in cities now, and the importance of efficient urban land use and ‘smart’ development has become ever greater over recent decades. Cities are the key centres of human activity and the engines of economic growth in the world today. A world which has been drastically transformed by rapid technological change, expanding globalisation, profound cultural shifts and new economic perspectives. One, moreover, bring a whole range of fresh opportunities and challenges. Traditional ways in which cities were planned and managed increasingly turn out to be less relevant and less sustainable in such times of accelerating change and greater complexity in the global environment.

The central thrust of this paper is around the adage: “Imagine ahead – plan backwards”. The paper explores the challenges facing 21<sup>st</sup> century cities, their municipal governments and constituent planning agencies. It examines the role of different ‘futures’ approaches applied in order to assist urban planners and municipal decision-makers in dealing with the issues that lie ahead. It presents examples of different ways in which cities reposition themselves, envision their futures and deal with challenges and opportunities brought about by global and local change.

Key words: cities, futures, urban planning.

## 1. The Context

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is being recognised as the 'century of cities'. More than a half of the world's population now lives in cities, and the importance of urban environments has become even greater over recent decades. Cities are the key centres of human activity and the engines of economic growth throughout the world, a world that has been dramatically transformed and is more complex, more competitive and better connected than ever before (Ratcliffe 2002a). Rapid technological change, expanding globalisation, profound cultural shifts and new economic trends have brought about a whole range of fresh opportunities and challenges. Traditional ways in which cities were planned and managed turn out to be less relevant and less sustainable in times of an accelerating pace of change and greater complexity in the global environment. Nowadays cities search for new, more effective, ways of dealing with existing problems and measures that would help them to avoid further turmoils ahead. They look for a preferred future state and the means that would help them choose the path leading to it so as to create attractive and productive urban environments for inhabitants, business and visitors.

This paper is set around the adage: "Imagine ahead – plan backwards". It explores the challenges facing 21<sup>st</sup> century cities and their governments; it identifies the difficulties the planning profession encounters in times of accelerating change and increasing uncertainty for the future; it examines the nature and role of the futures approach in the city context; and demonstrates how various cities, such as Bilbao, Dublin, Lyon and Vancouver, reposition themselves, envision their futures, and deal with the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Increasingly, it is recognised that cities, in order to create sustainable competitive environments, need to transform their planning policy and practice to encourage active business and civic engagement in concerted planning and decision-making. Vision, leadership and collaborative action lie at the foundation of building sustainable and competitive cities in the future. Futures approaches such as Prospective and Foresight, and techniques, such as Scenario Planning and Visioning, can play an important role in developing preferred futures,

creating a platform for collaboration between different actors and formulating specific actions and broad policy proposals.

### **1.1. Contemporary urban planning and its challenges**

Planning, although concerned with the future by definition, for many years has mostly been concentrating on shaping the physical form of cities and securing the provision of adequate services for their inhabitants. Planning agencies progressively became actively involved in budgeting, land development, social service funding, administration of various programmes and projects and other short-term activities (Isserman 1985). Planners however, have generally tended to separate the physical form from the social, economic and environmental aspects rather than treating all these elements in an integrated manner (Gaffikin and Morrissey 1999). Planners, the ‘visionary profession’, who’s role “is to lead from the present to the future” (Isserman op cit), arguably have lost their creativity and innovative thinking in order to respond to the current needs, future projections and crises on the ground.

Planning has neglected time and the future in order to fulfil present spatial demands (Isserman Ibid, APAJ 2001 and Ratcliffe op cit). The methods used in spatial analysis and territorial planning have advanced greatly, but the methods for coping with the time dimension in planning have not been developed to the same extent. It is increasingly being recognised that the planner’s toolkit for exploring the future needs to be improved and broadened (Ratcliffe Ibid).

Traditional planning systems are based on the model that can best be described as “predict and provide”. The policies are developed and decisions are made on the basis of evidence that is usually gathered through observation of historical trends such as population, demand for various types of infrastructure housing, schools, leisure, retail and the like. These trends are projected into the future through the application of a range of techniques mainly quantitative. Typically such trend projections have several hypotheses, usually the case trend, the desirable alternative and the worst-case option. Often a set of wild cards is added and

some sort of cross-impact analysis is carried out in order to integrate all the elements and choose the option that will then be implemented. This model leads to the reinforcement of the present situation into the future and makes it more difficult to think of other alternatives (Serra 2001).

Reinforcement of past and present trends, however, is no longer an option. The emergence of powerful new drivers of change makes it impossible to act in a 'business as usual' way. Competition for investment, increasing social and environmental pressures and unexpected cultural transformations force towns, cities and regions to discover how to respond to new tendencies, tackle them in a comprehensive and integrated manner, learn how to anticipate what lies ahead and strive to create more liveable and attractive environments.

In this way, contemporary urban planners and decision-makers have come to recognise a whole range of fresh challenges, which face them:

- The need to find effective ways of understanding the urban embroglio which cities have become and the global context within which they function.
- The need to anticipate future change that may and will influence cities.
- The need to find new ways in which the broad community and its various constituent interest groups can actively be engaged in planning and managing their cities in order to shape their urban environments according to their chosen values and perceived needs.
- The necessity to comprehend that it is not enough anymore simply to be responsive it is essential to be proactive.

In order to tackle these challenges, planners and decision-makers have sought for new approaches and methods to assist them. The Futures field is proving to be one of the most fruitful sources of methods and techniques currently being adopted for city planning and urban around the world.

## 1.2. Futures in the city context

*“The future is not a probable place we are being taken to, but a preferred place we are creating.*

*The tracks to it are not found and followed, but made by laying and constructing the trail”.*

*(Ellyard 1993)*

Futures methods facilitate dealing with the complexity of systems and the uncertainty of impending change. They help to anticipate what lies ahead and to build images of the most desirable future. They also set a philosophical and psychological background for rethinking the present in the light of the future. The futures field raises a number of questions that assist in creating mindsets ready to deal with upcoming matters and events in a constructive and creative way.

Futures, prospective, foresight, scenario planning and urban visioning can successfully be used in promoting urban planning processes in order to foster the sustainable development of prosperous cities and towns in a manner that favours a more holistic, inclusive, integrative and creative approach (Ratcliffe 2004). They assist in the development of a widely agreed vision of where the place in question wants to be in twenty, fifty or a hundred years time (Gaffikin and Morrissey 1999), and they help to set a path towards this desired state.

The methods most often used are visioning and scenario planning. Visioning is a process in which communities values, desires and hopes for the future of their city or region are combined into an image of the place in its preferred future state (Kitsuse & Myers 2000). Visioning promotes an inspiring and creative approach to “remaking the purpose” (Gaffikin and Morrissey op cit) of places in decline, struggling with social, infrastructural and environmental problems or places looking for their own identity and position in the global context. Gaffikin and Morrissey (ibid) recognise a role of vision planning in attempting to end the old segregation between various city dimensions and in integrating these elements in order to ensure a holistic approach towards development. They look at long-term visioning as a method that “looks far enough ahead to avoid the immediate concerns about ‘feasibilities’ such as cost”. Visioning

helps to establish 'where' we want to go and also 'why'. The 'why' question leads to the discussion on the values and principles underlining the vision of preferred future and enables the engagement of the wider community in this debate. The engagement of all sectors of society, often representing diverse interests, in the visioning process gives the opportunity to exchange their views and come to a common conclusion. It is much easier to discuss diverse points of view and seek a compromise using the future as "blank canvas to sketch from", then to deal with present problems and dilemmas that seem to be largely unchangeable and very difficult to solve (Ibid).

Another method sometimes used on its own, or as a part of prospective or visioning exercises is scenario planning. The scenario method is a powerful technique supporting decision-making processes. Scenario stories describe what cities might be like a few decades ahead and stimulate thinking about what is really desired and what policy proposals are needed in order to achieve that preferred state. The scenario process is an important technique in itself as it develops an understanding of what type of forces will shape urban environments and how these forces can act and interact with each other.

## **2. Imaginative Cities**

*"Successful cities seemed to have some things in common – visionary individuals, creative organisations and political culture sharing a clarity of purpose."*

(Charles Landry 2000)

Over the past decade cities and city regions around the globe have been undertaking various exercises aimed at setting the direction for their future development. These exercises have different structures, budgets, time-scales and time-horizons, and methodologies. They have also been initiated for different reasons and by different organisations, but there are similar experiences shared by all of them.

This paper presents examples of four cities: Bilbao, Dublin, Lyon and Vancouver, illustrating the exercises that were undertaken in order to develop preferred future visions for these respective cities. Despite the differences in the way these exercises were conducted, a number of common threads can be identified:

- Leadership.
- Collaboration between all actors within the city/metropolitan region.
- An holistic approach towards urban space.
- The importance of the actual process - not just a product.

Leadership had a significant role to play in initiating and conducting the process in three cases. The individual leadership of Raymond Barre (Mayor of Lyon) and Josu Ortuondo (Mayor of Bilbao) led to the setting up *Millenaire 3* and *Bilbao-Metropoli-30*, bodies respectively responsible for the development of a future vision and related

### Dublin 2020 Vision

Ireland witnessed exceptional economic growth during the “Celtic Tiger” era. It resulted in the major physical, social and cultural transformation of its capital, Dublin. Although the city has reached a significant international status, it is struggling with a number of critical infrastructural and social problems. In order to sustain Dublin’s competitiveness and to achieve balanced development, these problems need to be solved. But it is also being recognised that the city needs to have a vision of where it wants to be in 10, 20 or 50 years time and develop a strategy that would set a path to this imagined city state.

In response to this need, the Dublin Chamber of Commerce undertook in late 2003 to develop a vision for the city in year 2020. The vision was developed through a structured process (Prospective through Scenarios) by a group of selected experts on strategic planning coming from various business sectors, the Chamber’s members, over a period of 8 months.

The vision portrays Dublin as:

- “A *knowledge city*”, in which life-long learning and personal and civic development are on the daily agenda, where civic and environmental attitudes are formed at the beginning of the learning cycle and teaching how to think creatively and independently is a part of the curriculum.

- “A *great European city*”, which is well-known in Europe for its distinct cultural identity and trademarks, where citizens feel and act as stakeholders, where living is safe, comfortable and convivial.

- “A *city that works*”, because growth is planned and managed, resources are utilised in an efficient way and public services such as transportation, waste management, energy and water supply meet the highest standards.

- “A *highly competitive city*”, which attracts highly qualified labour and encourages R&D, where enterprise and entrepreneurial culture are promoted and a fiscal regime and regulations support business and innovation.

- “A *city wisely governed*” by a directly elected Mayor, who ensures implementation of plans and enforcement of policies, a city with its own transparent financial system, in which central and local government powers are in balance and citizens, the business community and public authorities work together to ensure its optimal development.

Within each of the above themes Dublin Chamber of Commerce proposed a number of key policy measures that need to be introduced and a series of actions required for the vision to be realised.

Dublin Chamber of Commerce recognises that in order for the vision to be realised the support of key stakeholders involved in the city development is required. Therefore, the first step that should be undertaken is the establishment of a Forum for Dublin, that would bring together all players within the city - local authorities, business community, citizens, academics, environmental groups and so forth. The Forum would facilitate further debate on the future of the city and ensure



implementation plans. In Dublin, it was the leadership of an organisation, the Dublin Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber of Commerce decided to develop a vision for the city in 20 years time in the absence of other similar initiatives. It was felt that Dublin after a period of high economic growth had reached a plateau and the fundamental rethinking of the future direction of the city was needed in order to sustain competitiveness and enhance the quality of life.

### **Lyon Millenaire 3 – “21 priorities for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”**

Lyon is the third-largest city in France. Once it used to be the main French city and a major European centre. It has a long business tradition that continued through the centuries and sustained the city's thriving prosperity and international position. Lyon's status has declined with the rise of Paris and as a result of the administrative changes in the 1960s. Lyon then became a capital of the new Rhone-Alpes region, but its role was not recognised by other economically independent sub-regions like the Saint-Etienne (Le Gales 1994). A highly fragmented and weak local government system, urban sprawl, social problems and the need to improve the competitiveness of the region underlined the development of the Millenaire 3 project.

The Millenaire 3 programme was launched in 1997 by Raymond Barre, Mayor of Lyon and President of Greater Lyon. The project aimed at providing the conurbation with a comprehensive, integrated development programme consistent with the sustainability principles that would enable Lyon to improve its international ranking and achieve social cohesiveness (EDURC 2000).

The Greater Lyon area has approximately 1.3 million inhabitants and its territory is divided among 55 municipalities. One of the great challenges for the project was to bring all these towns together so as to create a coherent whole, and then engage the representatives of all groups (local government agencies, business circles, academia and community groups) into the development of the strategy.

The Millenaire 3 approach was based on the assumption that planning for the future can no longer be left entirely to specialists and that it should be based on the co-operation of all actors involved in shaping the city. The approach led to the synergy of three functions: public debate, networking of actors and projects. The vision developed within the Millenaire 3 framework describes Greater Lyon through five strategic policy themes:

- An international, culturally receptive city
- An attractive, liveable city
- A city that fosters the spirit of enterprise
- A city conducive to lifetime learning
- A city putting consultative democracy to work

Within each of these policy themes a number of more detailed objectives was specified. The total number of priority objectives was twenty one thus: “21 priorities for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.

The project helped to establish a stable relationship based on trust between the civil society and the Greater Lyon. It brought back the desire for genuine public debate, encouraged networking of stakeholders representing various areas, and provided fresh visibility for non-mainstream actors and forces rising within the metropolis. Millenaire 3 contributed to emergence of projects arising from the civil society.

Collaboration by all actors within the city/metropolitan region was deemed an essential foundation for the projects in every case. It is widely recognised that “the collaborative process helps to develop rich solutions and ensure that the ownership of the solutions are rooted in the community so that they will be implemented” (Cities PLUS 2004). In Bilbao, Lyon and Vancouver representatives of all sectors (public agencies, business community, citizen groups,

experts and academics) were invited into the process and took an active part in building and implementing the common vision. In Dublin, although the vision itself was developed by the business association, it has been recognised that it can be realised only if all the stakeholders in the city ultimately take ownership of the vision and commit themselves collectively to common action. With this in mind the Dublin Chamber of Commerce intends to use the vision as an invitation to a grand debate about the future of the city, in which all actors and agencies would engage.

### **Revitalisation Plan for Metropolitan Bilbao**

Bilbao, situated in the Spanish Basque Country, within its metropolitan border is a home for about 1 million people spread around 30 municipalities. Traditionally the economy of the city was based on steel and shipbuilding industries. As a result of the global shift from industry to a service based economy, Bilbao has been struggling with severe economic, social and environmental problems. The fears for the future of the city led to the mobilisation of local actors and the undertaking of extensive planning action in 1992. A public and private partnership body - 'Bilbao-Metropoli-30' was founded in order to develop a new vision for the future of the metropolitan region and prepare a regeneration plan divided up into easily legible projects (EDURC 1999).

The regeneration plan for Bilbao was based on a comprehensive integrated approach. The overall aim of the plan was "to improve the welfare level and the quality of life of its inhabitants through the improvement of the urban environment and the international economic competitiveness of the metropolis" (TRANSLAND 1999). In order to realise the plan a set of eight critical issues was identified:

- Investment in human resources.
- Service metropolis in a modern industrial region.
- Mobility and accessibility.
- Environmental regeneration.
- Urban regeneration.
- Cultural centrality.
- Co-ordinated management by the public administration and the private sector.
- Social action.

The methodology used for the development of the strategic plan was based on participation and evaluation. Committees comprising experts, representatives of different sectors and decision-makers took part in all phases of the process: planning, implementation and evaluation. Evaluation is an essential part of the process. In this phase the impact of new facilities on the city's overall situation is considered as well as the social impact of the measures undertaken.

A holistic approach towards the urban environment was another characteristic common for all four projects. The methodologies applied in these exercises enabled participants to look at their cities as entireties. It has been recognised, especially in the Vancouver case, that: "the key to sustainability requires determination to focus simultaneously on all dimensions: social, economic and environmental; short-term, medium-term and long-term; from the local to global levels" (Cities PLUS op cit).

Another characteristic common to these projects was recognition of the importance of the process by which the visions were developed. Bringing the right agencies and people together to share their perceptions and ambitions, and enabling them to think creatively and flexibly together, is frequently as valuable as the particular findings derived from the effort (Ratcliffe op cit). One of the participants from Vancouver, Ron Clarke summed it up thus: “The process generates informed choices. It is not about seeing the future, and it’s certainly not about guaranteeing an outcome, but it is about defining a rich and intellectually robust and defensible process. Win, loose or draw, we’ve already gained immensely” (Cities PLUS op cit).

### **The Long-term Plan for Greater Vancouver**

The 100-year plan for Greater Vancouver was developed as Canada’s response to an international competition on Sustainable Urban Systems Design, sponsored by Gas Union. The project was run through co-operation of the Sheltair Group (a private planning consulting company), the GVRD (the public sector client), the Liu Institute for Global Issues (a university based think tank) and the International Centre for Sustainable Cities (a civil society organisation). The 18 months long process evolved into a dialogue between 500 individuals and organisation representing public, private and civil sector actors.

The approach adopted by Vancouver involved three main phases:

1. Envisioning the future of the region
2. Exploring the options
3. Implementing the plan.

The overall process was based upon the Adaptive Management Framework, which could be described as a pyramid that has a vision for the desired future at the zenith, and then is built from more detailed levels including goals, targets, strategies and implementation policies and technologies.

The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) recognised the project as very beneficial for the establishment of new partnerships, clarification and stimulation of the commitment to urban sustainability and creation of learning networks at the regional, national and international levels. The project represents a substantial change in planning practice towards integrated comprehensive planning. In the past, the GVRD would develop its strategic direction from a series of separate plans each with its own vision, goals, time-scales and structures, while this plan treats the urban system as an integrated whole.

It has been recognised that the 100-year horizon helped to look forward leaving behind current preoccupations and vested interests. The extrapolative and backcasting scenarios were powerful tools in the process, which was as important as the plan itself.

### **3. Final Thoughts**

In order to create attractive environments for their inhabitants, business and visitors 21<sup>st</sup> century cities need to be creative and innovative, proactive and open to new opportunities. Their future should be build upon values and principles promulgated and proclaimed by their citizens. Collectively built visions should mobilise people and resources into collaborative

action. Futures methodologies can assist in fulfilling these aims through the provision of adequate approaches and techniques. Cities such as Bilbao, Dublin, Lyon and Vancouver, as well as many others have accepted these challenges and initiated actions to meet them. Again, it bears reputation to state that the central message and major change in mind-set in all this is to: “Imagine ahead – plan backwards”.

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