**Is small still beautiful? Does size matter?**

What future for settlements and transport?

To centralize or decentralize – that is the question. Back in the 1970s environmentalists reacted powerfully to the growing scale of everything: the size of cities, the centralization of power, the loss of individual contact with nature. *Radical Technology*, and before that the Ecologist’s *Blueprint for Survival*, painted a picture of local self-sufficiency. The Blueprint imagined a world where cities dissolved into autonomous villages (following on from William Morris ‘News from nowhere’!). Food, energy, water, sewage, construction, could all be locally managed. Small communities would regain power over their lives. Social cohesion would be strengthened.

A whole movement sprang up devoted to this Elysian vision. Eco-villages and eco-neighbourhoods were planned, and some realized. One trailblazer was Crystal Waters Permaculture Village in Australia, and I’m still wearing the T-shirt! In Britain an outstanding example is Hockerton eco-village in Nottinghamshire. The technologies of home-growing, composting, water reuse, reed-bed sewage schemes, earth sheltered dwellings, solar and wind power, all facilitate localization. Telecommunications and internet allow some residents to work from home, members of the global village. Communal approaches to land, housing, resources and facilities build a sense of shared social purpose. At their best such schemes are hugely inspiring.

But all these eco-communities are small fry. Society, markets, governments work on another level altogether. Most significantly people, including those in villages of any sort, rely on *contact* and *exchange*. Eco-settlements are not islands, sufficient unto themselves, but depend on educational and health facilities, leisure and cultural activities, work and retail opportunities in bigger places. Consider teenagers in a village. There comes a time when they need broader education, and demand wider social contact. Families buy more vehicles. The village is dependent on the town.

From another angle, it is possible to analyse the *general* pattern of travel, energy use and accessibility. The research findings are unequivocal. While it is often asserted that cities are resource sinks, exporting their pollution, implying that rural settlements are less environmentally damaging, this distorts the truth. Cities’ ecological footprints can be very extensive, but in rich countries their carbon intensity is much less *per person* than hamlets and villages. Rural dwellings tend to use more energy (for a given size), and rural households are more car-dependent, travelling two or three times as far to satisfy their needs. The principles of the *compact city,* deriving from concerns about climate change, urban regeneration and social cohesion, are written into European and UK planning guidelines. The bigger settlements provide something that small settlements cannot: accessibility.

The market in land and property also works to undermine the viability of low impact rural development. In a crowded country like England most villages are within striking distance of a town or city. Attractive rural settlements are taken over by commuters and retirees. Most so-called rural settlements are now really urban – detached fragments of city. In more isolated locations second home purchasers push up prices, cramping the opportunities for less affluent households. Despite protective countryside policies we actually have a net dispersal of business too, into locations that are entirely car and lorry dependent. The only way to reverse these trends – in a capitalist country – is to massively increase the friction of distance – the cost of travel. The dream of a world of small autonomous low-impact settlements remains just that – a dream.

So what is the answer? What settlement strategy is relevant and possible in our pluralist society? Let’s consider a different angle: the health, well-being and quality of life of all. These depend on so many personal characteristics and choices. Many people find their options highly constrained by income and structural factors. If we want places that are both good for people to live in and good for the local and global environment, then there are some shared themes: places that facilitate safe and pleasurable walking and cycling; places that provide easy accessibility to both local and city-level jobs and facilities; places withe with excellent air quality; places with affordable and varied housing; places giving easy access to greenspace; places that are very energy and water efficient; places where local healthy food growing, composting, reuse and recycling are possible….we know what is needed. The question is, how to evolve towns and cities so that local health and global sustainability are possible?

It is no use being half-hearted about this. Putting in a stretch of cycleway, building low-energy homes, or planting street trees, may be worthwhile projects individually, but they are mere palliatives. The whole structure of a city and its hinterland (equally that of market towns and major urbanized regions) require an integrated strategy. Such a strategy encompasses land use, economic development, transport, housing, facilities, greenspace, water and energy. It involves working creatively with people through education, training and public engagement. It involves building partnerships between civic, institutional, market, and community agencies. It relies on consistent political commitment over at least a generation. My favourite place that demonstrates this is all possible, is Freiburg, Germany. A city of 200,000, it has a buoyant economy linked to the university, a great cultural scene, diverse housing, active communities, an enviable train, tram and bus system integrating all parts of city and hinterland, a good cycling network, new and renewed neighbourhoods with superb local facilities and very low car use, an historic centre dedicated to a safe, convenient, convivial and aesthetically pleasing pedestrian experience.

In Britain we are hamstrung by government policies: centralization of power in Whitehall, specifically the Treasury, so that municipalities become disenfranchised; and by a rather uncritical neo-liberal economic philosophy in relation especially to land and development. Decentralization *is,* after all, necessary. But it is decentralization of power, not (in most situations) dispersal of population.

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