

INSTITUTE FOR URBAN DESIGN

Notebook #01

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The New York

2030 Notebook

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Twinkie City

PlaNYC is a motherhood plan, a portmanteau of totally reasonable propositions. So it's difficult to disagree with the goals that the plan embraces—remediated brownfields, cleaner air, sequestered carbon, improved waterways, better transit. But all endeavors, I believe, can profit from the invigoration of skepticism, particularly skepticism that has its origins in love.

With loving skepticism, then, I ask you this: Will PlaNYC have the effect of making New York more hospitable to the diversity that we all prize? Or will it further accelerate our Twinkiefication: a rainbow city with a soft white center in Manhattan, rapidly on its way to becoming the largest gated community on the planet?

The question for us must be: How does this plan embody and extend the conjoined issues of environmental and social justice? Will it strengthen the health of the body politic, as well as the body physical, by reinforcing genuinely democratic participation? Or is PlaNYC going to be yet another instance of the top-down style that has become all too familiar during the course of Mayor Bloomberg's administration?

I have particular anxiety about the extension, for good or ill, of the trade-off mentality that characterizes so many municipal endeavors in the city. For example, inclusionary zoning—or any system based on bonusing—is saddled with a fundamental contradiction: we give away some identifiable amenity in favor of some other value (in this case desperately needed “affordable” housing), which we, in our calculation, consider to be sufficiently important to warrant the sacrifice of light or air or other qualities inscribed in our zoning laws. We cannot simply continue to ratchet up our densities (and our prices) on the basis of the ineluctable mantra of “growth,” and I must be skeptical of a plan that does not allow itself to question this predicate.

I am also anxious about a plan that focuses so exclusively on environmental issues, and fails to situate them politically. If we look at the history of the green movement—of which I certainly consider myself a charter member—it has effectively displaced another kind of politics. Green may be the new site of the civic, but it is also the new red. I think that we sacrifice the old red in favor of the new green at our peril, particularly in this city with its history of progressive politics and popular initiatives. The

Soft and white in the center, brown around the edges: With Manhattan soon to be the world's largest gated community, let's not sacrifice social justice for the absolute good of green.

Michael Sorkin

distribution of resources is always a political issue, no matter how hard we seek to “naturalize” it.

Will the big morphologies of this plan—the decking over of highways and rail yards—actually be realizable within the context of the economic and social realities of the city? And indeed, are these Moses-style projects a desirable, realizable thing? Or are they a sop to the idea that if the city is going to grow so dramatically (an eventuality itself considered “natural”), we need to take very big steps in order to deal with it? I have no problem with big steps. But I do question both who will take them and who will be stepped on.

An anecdote: I run the urban design program at City College and ride the subway uptown, walking with hundreds of students and faculty from Broadway across 138th Street to get to campus. Recently, four street trees were planted near the corner of Amsterdam, occupying half the width of a relatively narrow sidewalk. Now, students must walk across dirt in order to negotiate the crowded route. The problem is not the trees; far be it from me to reject the addition of a single tree to the city of New York. The issue has to do with the intelligence and logic of the trade-off of sidewalk for tree, of balancing the rights of people on foot against the desirability of adding to the green canopy.

My being inconvenienced by the unquestionable good of tree planting is unnecessary as there is a much more reasonable place to plant these (and many more) trees: the parking lane that sits directly next to them, which, by my count, accommodates no more than 25 private automobiles. Would it not be better to fill that lane with bike racks and gardens and street trees? Do our steps always have to be progressive but never radical? Must we always balance everybody's interests—parkers and walkers and breathers in this case—as if they all had the same weight? No. Politics is the means by which we decide that some interests must trump others, and I hope we will rise in spirited defense of those qualities that are most crucial to the future of the city and all of its citizens. Let us make constructive suggestions for how this wonderful beginning of a plan can be improved to support and abet such visionary and equitable interests.

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Lovely Plan, Lousy Process

There has been a great deal of celebration of New York City's long-term sustainability plan. While it merits celebration, we would learn more if we critically analyzed the plan in a much deeper way. Its ten broad goals are wonderful, and there is not much to disagree with. But the real questions for all of us are: What is the city going to look like in 2030 and beyond, who is going to make the decisions, and how will the plan's goals be met?

The first problem reflects the planning process itself. The 2030 plan was proposed and developed by the mayor's office and outside consultants, avoiding the city's established mechanism for adopting plans, which is outlined in Section 197A of the city charter. The charter and the City Planning Department's rules call for plans to be presented to community boards, the borough presidents, the city planning commission, and the city council. At each of these stages public hearings are held and votes taken, similar to the city's well-established land use review process. None of this was done for PlaNYC. As long as it is only the mayor's plan, implementation rests mainly on the mayor's shoulders. And when a new mayor arrives, who will care or remember what the last mayor did?

A second major problem with PlaNYC is that its basic premise predicts one million new residents by the year 2030. That projection is voodoo demographics: You take a ruler, put it on the paper, and extend the straight line out. Any third-grader could do that (though it did take a team of pros to distribute that growth throughout the city). Why throw a mantle of absolute truth over the straight-line projection? What about looking at other possible scenarios? It shapes everything else in the plan. The plan says that if we're going to have one million new people, than we need to be sustainable. This is backwards. The planning process should first look at the needs and aspirations of people who now live in New York and then ask how to sustain them. Create a dialogue and process that includes people who live and work in the city. It is not clear to the public how decisions are being made and that they have any role in the 2030 process.

Growth drives the 2030 plan, and one of its instruments is so-called transit-oriented development. This is a great idea invented for low-density suburban areas that had transit hubs that nobody lived around. Transit-oriented development meant building density around the

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Voodoo demographics and pro-growth precepts pose problems for PlaNYC.

Tom Angotti

transit hubs. This is a good way to cure suburban sprawl, but has absolutely no meaning in New York City, where the whole city is a transit hub! Transit-oriented development is being used as a rationale for real estate deals such as Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn—which the Bloomberg administration claims will be a transit-oriented development. But there will be no transit improvements at the city's third-largest transit hub, where platforms are already overflowing.

Transportation is the greatest opportunity for change in the 2030 plan, but too much attention is being paid to congestion pricing. I support congestion pricing, but as one among many tactics to reduce traffic in the city. Congestion pricing in London was part of a much larger strategy to reduce private automobile traffic, but in New York it is not. Also, the strategic objective shouldn't be to reduce congestion. Traffic engineering in the twenty-first century must reduce automobile use. The majority of auto users in New York don't live in Manhattan, and they don't go to and from Manhattan; they're in the outer boroughs. And Mr. Bloomberg is having trouble selling congestion pricing because there is no plan for reducing traffic in the outer boroughs. I have hope for transportation, though, because of a wise decision Mr. Bloomberg made to appoint a new transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, who is looking to improve the pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure and access to mass transit. I hope she can make permanent changes in the next two years.

Those keeping score might like to know that our Center for Community Planning and Development has started a project called Sustainability Watch jointly with Gotham Gazette, where we present research and analysis of the 2030 plan, allowing praise when it's merited and criticism when it's due. You can find details at www.gothamgazette.com.

Reglobalizing New York

To thrive in the next century, New York needs a new urban culture of ecological risk management.

Brian McGrath

PlaNYC has the potential to offer a new global model vastly different than the city of skyscrapers that captured the world's imagination and made New York the dominant city of the twentieth century. With the rapid pace of global urbanization, it will not be New York's business districts that are copied the world over, but the city's continued ability to welcome and provide opportunity for the

diverse needs of its newest residents and their children, while aggressively confronting the environmental challenges that characterize this century. These twin challenges—human migration and climate change—will ultimately measure the success of PlaNYC's urban planning and design initiatives.

New York's historic concentration, efficiency, density, and diversity all make it an ideal urban environment in which to plan for the next century. Yet the world's planners, government officials, and developers have lately been more likely to visit Orlando and Las Vegas as they ponder the fate of their own cities. Themed enclaves sited in a context that mostly follows the utopian dreams of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City of Tomorrow rather than Jane Jacobs' sidewalk ballet are the new models for the twenty-first century city. Recent construction in tourist-friendly New York seems equally susceptible to the allures of the seduction of the theme park. While PlaNYC puts forward the demographic and environmental challenges of the near future, most development in the city—especially high-density waterfront projects—ignores both likely future scenarios. Affordable housing and schools together with long-term planning for sea-level rise and carbon reduction are the projects that the elite global architects should be focusing on rather than more and more expensive residences in glittery towers.

Mayor Bloomberg, like the modernizing King of Siam, Chulalongkorn, has traveled throughout Europe searching for good ideas in urban management. I would suggest he also visit the high-density cities of East Asia. Carol Willis, director of the Skyscraper Museum, has planned a series of exhibitions on vertical density which argues that cities like Hong Kong and Shanghai have replaced New York as models of efficient concentration and movement of masses. My own research in water-based cities such as Bangkok, Thailand, and Hangzhou, China, has led me to argue that while Asian cities could learn much from New York as a social model for absorbing new migrants, the historical cities of the East and Southeast Asia monsoon belt have remarkable systems of water and landscape design and management that are well suited for confronting the regular flooding which will accompany climate change with ingenious methods of absorbing huge shifts in water cycles.

Historically, the capital cities of Siam migrated down the Chao Phraya River basin, moving from mountain valley kingdoms of Chiang Mai, to Sukhothai between a mountain range and river flood plain, to Ayutthaya, an island city at the confluence of three rivers, to deltaic Bangkok. Each city was conceived as part of social and hydrological tributary and distributary systems that adapted and adjusted to extremes of draught and flood. Hangzhou, China was developed on a silted dike along the Qiantang River Delta. The city focuses on West Lake, a luxurious artificial water park that inspired centuries of poetic and artistic celebration. The lake takes in fresh water from the river and circulates it back through the city and the Grand Canal. Regular maintenance including dredging always resulted in public amenities such as the Bai and Su Causways which connect the city to the mountains beyond the lake, and which create upper lake basins to mitigate extremes of flooding and drought.

The disparate population of some of the world's richest and poorest people can learn from such strategies as they engage in the psycho-socio-natural process of creating a new urban culture of ecological risk management. As Giovanni Arrighi has argued, the loss of New York's hegemony as the center of global capitalism will more than be made up by its future role as a cultural city, as the histories of former world capitals such as Amsterdam and London demonstrate. Perhaps this is another reason why Mayor Bloomberg should be borrowing urban planning thinking from Asian cities.

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