

EDITOR'S PAGE

We are Not Alone... I would like to exercise editorial prerogative to expand my usual one-page column into a bit longer report on what I consider a very hopeful indicator for the future of regional planning and consequently sustainable land use and development practices worldwide.

Two issues ago Mark Gibb and Dale Medearis reported on their international conference on regional planning in the Washington DC area. I recently had the honor of being invited to speak and participate in a major United Nations conference on sustainable urbanization internationally.

I found the convening both encouraging and reinforcing of our efforts in the U.S. With our independent position in the world, we might often feel we are going it alone. These types of international convenings demonstrate how truly interconnected we all are.

It seemed the best way to convey our relation to this larger world view would be to share a summary of the proceedings, highlighting not only the topics of the conference but the wide and impressive array of speakers and presenters. I would like to also highlight the role of a neighbor member Roberto Villarreal, a new U.N. delegate from Mexico as an avid champion of sustainability planning and development.

One of my take-aways was that we can learn much from the plans, programs, policies and developments already in place world-wide, but we have much to share, especially in our experience with planning in an open democracy.

I would like to thank Jim McCullar, FAIA who provided his notes that succinctly summarize the proceedings. There were several short responding panels I have not included for space and brevity. The New York City Chapter of the AIA was the U.N.'s main local partner in planning the conference, although the committee chair was APA member Ernest Hutton, FAICP.



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SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Role of Infrastructure in Metropolitan development

13 May 2009, United Nations Headquarters, New York
ECOSOC Chamber

Conference Notes by James McCullar, FAIA

Plenary Session – Opening Remarks

Sarbuland Khan, Executive Coordinator, UN DESA DPADM GAID opened the conference by comparing it to the 2008 Forum which focused on cities, but this year the focus has shifted to regions. He compared the problems associated with rapid urban growth to clogged arteries in the human body “if the heart becomes sick, the body will fail”.

Anna K Tibaijuka, United Nations Under-Secretary-General, Executive Director, United Nations Human Settlements Programme in the keynote, stated 50% of the world populations currently live in cities, but cities account for 75% of energy consumption and 65% of emissions. 95% of new urban growth results in slum conditions. The infrastructure of cities can be destructive to the ecosystem. She urged the integration of infrastructure planning with social concerns. The challenge is make systems not only competitive and sustainable, but socially responsible to occupy a common ground between the environment and development.





Cheick Sidi Diarra, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developing Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States remarked that no country has developed without urban centers. Last year 3.3B people lived in cities and the growth rate is alarming. By 2030 there will be 5B with most from poor countries. How to reap the benefits while mitigating the problems? Poorly planned settlements increase the toll on lives. Climate change, including rising sea levels, will make things worse. Without legal rights, people are unable to rise above the poverty level. The future depends on decisions made now.

Robert Yaro, Executive Director America 2050 Regional Plan Association shifted the focus to the US and presented the case for sustained infrastructure planning, illustrating the point made by Mr. Diarra.

He described the role of the RPA, a NGO founded 90 years ago when the US was still a developing country. RPA has developed three regional plans for the New York tri-state region and is now engaged with America 2050 which has defined emerging megaregions in the US where future population growth will occur, but where existing infrastructure is dated, and most lack mobility systems compared to those in the EU. RPA is convening public forums in 11 megaregions to promote regional planning.

The US has a long tradition of national planning that has sustained its growth over two centuries. Starting with George Washington's promotion of interstate commerce and Jefferson's plans for building canals and surveying the west, through Teddy Roosevelt's conservation of national resources and water management programs, FDR's New Deal hydroelectric projects that developed the west, to Eisenhower's interstate highway program that shaped post war development. But no new programs have emerged in the last half century with a five fold increase in the GDP and the results of stagnation are evident. In spite of a public opinion that has forgotten those lessons, Obama's vision of sustainable growth and transition to rapid transit systems provides the potential to do it again.

Dialogue Session 1

While the crisis of exponential urban growth and need for new infrastructure were identified as crucial, **Roberto Villarreal, Chief, Socio-Economic Governance and Management Branch, DPADM, DESA, Former Undersecretary of Urban Development, Mexico** noted the disparities in health, education, water and transportation between urban and rural areas in Latin America, and identified the need to support rural development.

Tina Intelmann, Vice President ,ECOSOC, Permanent Representative of Estonia to the UN cited Estonia's emergence from its post war eastern block era through decentralization and promotion of ICT. She said that the rapid urbanization in the post war period had to be rethought by bringing infrastructure closer to individual needs—citing the workplace, transportation, education, healthcare, and computer literacy.

Moderator **Ernest Hutton, FAICP Assoc AIA, Co-Chair New York New Visions** stressed "dialogue" and the need for grassroots planning with the potential link between local and national planning.

Ron Thomas, AICP, American Planning Association, Regional and Intergovernmental Division expanded the case made by Robert Yaro and described the US tendencies for common action that informed critical planning initiatives: deTocquville who observed American tendency to form associations, the positive impact of land grant colleges, and Ebenezer Howard who founded the garden city movement, among other examples. He focused on Daniel Burnham and development of the Chicago Plan, which led to the sustained development of that city; and its extension into surrounding states that is a model for megaregional planning. Speaking from his experience directing the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission to illustrate how the Chicago regional planning efforts have demonstrated that large-scale participation can be included in major metropolitan regional planning.

Peter Woods, Secretary General United Cities and Local Governments, Asia Pacific brought home the concern for rural development, decentralization, and grass roots planning by asking: What can be done to prevent or slow the mass rural migration to cities, the crux of the problem? He cited India, whose rapid growth in GDP is not reflected in its infrastructure. In Indonesia only 3% of GDP is spent on infrastructure. Even Australia, his home country, lacks sufficient decentralization of authority. He questions the efficacy of top down planning, and advocated a more equitable distribution of resources and empowerment of localities to solve their own problems.

Dialogue Session 2

Martin Ney, Deputy Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations, New York referenced the long urban history of Germany, whose cities date from the Romans. The sustained development has allowed for a high density that functions well. The government is committed to continued modernization and smart growth.

Moderator **Urs Gauchat, Dean, School of Architecture, New Jersey Institute of Technology** examined utopias—first used by Thomas Moore in 1516 vs dystopias—first used by J.S. Mill in 1868, to describe the state of urban affairs, where the alienation and social stratifications expressed in film and literature have turned into a disturbing reality. But ended with an note of optimism in urging a vision for planning cities which represent a concentration of solutions—citadels of commerce and culture, tangible manifestations of the human spirit.

Lyndsay Neilson, Director of Urban Planning, Melbourne (Australia) presented a case study of Melbourne, Australia, which ranks high in the Economist lists of livable cities.

James Vine reported on the UK, where in spite of its developed state, suffers an affordability crisis in housing brought about by an inequality in the distribution of resources and lack of local participation—not unlike the issues in developing countries raised by Peter Woods. Worse, some cities in the UK face a de-urbanization due to changes in industry and the workplace that further complicate planning (not unlike US cities several decades ago).

Concluding Session

Moderator **James McCullar, FAIA** summarized key points made by speakers. He compared this conference to last year's, which invited mayors and policy makers from 12 diverse cities from around the world for an exchange of planning initiatives. The conference today brought together a range of experts who have focused on the challenge of sustainable urbanization from differing perspectives that wove interconnected themes.

Sarbuland Kahn concluded, stating that the trends seemed daunting and asking how we solve the problems? The human mind can solve any problem, which it has done for millennia, and must do so again in the 21st century. This is a start. Not presumptuous, but doable.

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