HOUSING INFRASTRUCTURE CITIES: HONG KONG / SYDNEY HOW WE’RE BLINDED TO THE LIMITATIONS OF TRANSIT ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Transit Oriented Development (TOD) is understood to be a solution to a broad range of issues in contemporary city building. From housing density and the focus of urban renewal back toward the center of cities and in response to the desire to intensify suburban centers in the provision of more housing, more amenity, more walkable neighborhoods, it is understood to be a success. It is argued as part of responses to questions of both social and environmental sustainability in terms of the reduction of resource use through the concentration of activity around existing and newly developed transport hubs. Equally it is also presented as a solution to governmental risk amelioration and the exposure of tax payer resources to new development through innovations in funding models for example away from public sector only provision of infrastructure and toward the transfer of construction and demand risk, in addition to strategies such as value capture as part of sophisticated new models of public private partnerships or private delivery of projects. Together, these clusters of arguments for TOD make it a powerful and compelling concept. However, what these blind us to is the strategic socio-political failures of TOD if it is situated on a trajectory of urban spatial reasoning through the twentieth century and particularly with reference to a history that includes the Neighborhood Unit. Building housing in cities has through the twentieth century been a more complex problem then simply building density over infrastructure. This paper will examine some of that history, its practice in both north America, Uk and Australian cities, but also in Asian cities, and argue that neighborhood has been a critical spatial mechanism for constituting cities and ourselves as urban and domestic subjects. The absence of that reasoning in TOD has profound consequences for city functioning and social and political resilience

TOD is generally agreed to be a strategy linking land use and transport systems to create medium and high density areas of mixed use concentrated within an 800metre walking distance of transport. TOD emerged as a concept with force in the early 1980’s in response to the oil shocks and resultant energy crises of the 1970’s and an emerging environmental consciousness . Increasingly by the first decade of the twenty first century, TOD has become part of a more general argument for the recentralization of the city. The idea of the ‘Great Inversion’ has become shorthand for a reference to a centralizing flux not seen in the city since the decentralization of urban centers that began in the 1920’s
leading to the urban crises of the 1970’s, as witnessed in parts of North America in particular with the emptying out of city centers and attendant social problems that went with that.

In some senses then the TOD is the inheritor of the 1929 Neighborhood Unit (NU) plan. The NU is a strategic exemplar diagram that was generalized within urban spatial reasoning with its release as part of the 1929 Regional Plan of New York and its Environ. The NU is both a spatial and a sociopolitical argument for the scale-based organization of populations of people. It is understood as a unit of ‘balanced’ neighborhood communities and involves the diagrammatic negotiation of elements of work, home, transport and leisure. At its core was what was understood to be the fundamentals of community life: school, faith based meeting place, community hall, public open space, with housing and retail within a 400m walking radius.

However, what is of course different about these two models of city building, the NU and TOD, is that one, the NU, is about the de-centralization of the city, while the other, TOD, belongs to a contemporary arsenal of centralizing strategies. In the case of TOD, this is in response to a shift in perceptions of what the city is. There has been a contemporary and fundamental move away from understandings of the city as the dirty industrial and manufacturing center of the late nineteenth century, where arguments privileged the sanitation, health and hygiene benefits of suburban life over the apparent poverty of the inner city, toward something quite different in the first decades of the twentieth century. Now instead the city is understood to be the site of dynamic urban life, of walkable, convivial cultural and social engagement, a life that the new service and knowledge economy worker wants over anything else.1–Problematic however in the TOD, this bastard offspring and inversion of the NU, is the fact that despite the arguments driving it and enveloping it for urban culture and dynamism, economies of procurement and production and environmental sustainability, it typically contains none of the sophisticated spatial provision for real social and community life that has been at the core of city building since the 1920’s. As a consequence, what we have emerging in city transformation driven by the logic of TOD, and with reference to housing in particular, is that for all of its admirable environmental and political credentials, this is density done very badly. We are after all, more than just consumers. 2

THE NEIGHBORHOOD UNIT, A HISTORY.

As a diagram the NU contains at its core a school, child care, a park, a place of worship, meeting spaces, flanked by retail and commercial space held in place by high streets, and its residential component made up of quiet cul-de-sac streets. It is contained within a walking radius of around 400m and is designed for 3,000 to 4,000 people. Attributed to Clarence Perry, the NU was first generalized with its publication as part of the 1929 Regional Plan of New York and its Environ. Of course aspects of the NU had been appearing as a concept in various ways for some decades before this, but we will argue here that it is only in the 1920’s that it solidifies in its full form.3 The core of its instrumentality is to be found in the organizational and formal scale based spatial frame it sets for a continual critique of, and experimentation with, the relationship between home, work, leisure and transport. As a diagram it can be seen to be deployed most clearly into suburban expansion in developments such as Radburn, New Jersey, as equally as it can be seen at work in the reasoning behind large housing projects deployed later to reorganize cities such as New York in the middle of the twentieth century – projects such as Stuyvesant Town (1943), Brownsville Houses in Brooklyn (1948) and the earlier unbuilt Braun and Muschenheim slum clearance proposal for fifty blocks of the Upper East Side of New York of 1935. It can also continue to be seen at work in for example, Kuringai council’s reasoning about the placement of amenity for clusters of population within its local council jurisdiction in Sydney. The Neighborhood Unit has been in one sense then key to our ability to argue, on the occasion of housing, for benefit and shared amenity, for a better possible future for populations of people in cities that sit inside its boundaries, but also importantly, for those within its influence and beyond its boundaries in the existing urban fabric around the intervention. As a strategic exemplar diagram, the NU is an incitement to
thought, it demands that we ask the question: what size is the scale of neighborhood, what and where is its influence.

The first public presentation of what would later become the diagram of the NU published as part of the 1929 Regional Plan of New York and its Environs, was given by Clarence Perry to the National Community Centre Association and the American Sociological Society in Washington on December 26, 1923. Titled “A Community unit in city planning and development,” the presentation reflected a long association Perry had had with both the Playground and Recreational Association of America where he was a field officer with the responsibility to investigate how public schools might be used after hours for social and civic purposes. As a member of the community center movement some time later, Perry is quoted as saying “Every Schoolhouse a community capital and every community a little democracy.” Perry’s experience with this group provided the ground for experiments with the socially planned neighborhood. During the late nineteenth century and at the same time that urban theorists such as Ebenezer Howard were developing novel spatial links between economy, the social and the natural world through planning, there also was emerging ideas via the social sciences that provided new theoretical links between social relations and interaction and the physical environment of cities and towns. The Chicago School sociologists such as Robert Park and Ernest Burgess produced a significant body of literature bringing together the idea of constituting culture through the relationship of community and geography in a move that was fundamentally spatial.

Françoise Choay reminds us, in the face of the complexity of traditional pre-nineteenth-century urban and architectural spaces, it is easy to forget that ‘the creation of an autonomous discourse on space is a recent western development,’ and that this has been a hugely transgressive and disruptive force. As is evident in the development of the Neighbourhood Unit through Perry’s involvement in local politics and social science, it can be seen that the NU belongs to the catalogue of social spatial machines that constitute architectural urbanism’s tools for building the city. These instruments are what through the twentieth century would form a key part of liberal governmentalities’ reasoning. These are social spatial instruments that don’t act to crush populations in self governing, or that act in spite of populations, rather we can understand that, through the linking of social space, the family, education and neighborhood through something like the Neighbourhood unit, in fact we self govern through them. Isen Osborne and Rose have argued that this instrumentality is according to a knowledge of the ‘truth’ of the city — the truth of community and neighborhood produced through the new discipline of the social sciences.

Its possible to see then, contained within the NU and at its core, is ‘the ideal of an immanent political sociability.’ The Neighbourhood unit’s value then is not in its existence as an actual built object but rather in its usefulness as a measure. It ‘can be thrown up against any existing urban actuality as a principle for its critical rectification’ and this is how we continue to use it today in planning. Here politics is not government and its acts and laws and functions, the economy or morality for example, but rather government and liberal governance is understood as the art of governing or what has been referred to as the ‘conduct of conduct.’ It is a way of doing things, or acting on the action of individuals ‘taken either singly or collectively, so as to shape, guide, correct and modify the ways in which they conduct themselves.’ It ‘consists of various instruments and rationalities assembled to link the power of the state, the regulation of populations, and a ‘pastoral’ power which addressed itself to the conduct of those who recognized themselves as subjects.’

**URBAN SPATIAL REASONING VERSUS CULTURAL DIFFERENCE.**

Interestingly, the NU was not only deployed in the Anglo-speaking world. Lu reports that it was taken up broadly in Asia during the first half of the twentieth century. She reports that it was implemented in Republican China prior to 1949 by Japanese colonial planners in the organization of cities such as Changchun and Datong in the 1930s. Following this in the late 1940s Chinese planners initiated proposals for several major cities based on the neighborhood unit. These were finally completed after the 1949 Revolution. Socialist planners also experimented with several competing residential planning ideas during the 1950s: The micro district known as the xiaogu in Chinese and mikrorayon in Russian. Equally and outside of China, it is worth noting some of the more influential evolutions that
the concept has gone through.— Lucio Costa’s late 1950’s Superquadras for example, developed and implemented as part of the Brasilia master-plan. Here, Costa’s innovation is in challenging the size of the scale of neighborhood with four superquadras making the equivalent of a NU, arranged in an overlapping pattern where retail concentrations are situated. The superquadra is connected to the city via the positioning of public services on the margins, rather than at the core. This connects the services to a reservoir of user via primary and secondary road networks rather than simply remaining internal to each NU. Costas innovation was to challenge and question the size of the scale of neighborhood with the superquadra which is much denser than the original model, up to 12,000 people.

Lu acknowledges the taking up of the NU concept in China as involving “multiple associations, mediated practices, successive discursive conversations and ad hoc pragmatic decisions” adding that its ‘domestication’ by China “was a continual process of translating, taking, selecting, combining and reinventing” rather than a direct borrowing of ideas from ‘The West’ as is often argued in accounts of the NU as a kind of cultural imperialism or colonialism. What is interesting to this paper is simply the idea that urban spatial reasoning as a key part of liberal democratic techniques of governance was as active in these cities, as it was in the cities of North America, the UK and Australia. While cultural difference matters, modernity’s unique use of space as a discursive practice is operational regardless.

TOD: HONG KONG, AUSTRALIA AND MTR

In 2015 the Hong Kong metro operator, the Mass Transit Railway Corporation (MTR) announced its interest in looking at the opportunities in Australia for running value capture transport operations. MTR already runs the Melbourne Metro and will run the Sydney metro Northwest when it opens. The Melbourne operation is the most globally profitable for MTR, who operates through a ‘rail plus’ property model. This allows it to value capture capital uplift while paying for the construction and maintenance of rail lines via residential and commercial developments above its transport nodes. This strategy fits well into an Australian political context where over decades all levels of government have been limiting their own involvement in the provision of infrastructure, both in terms of transport but also institutional healthcare, education and housing infrastructure, as part of an amelioration of risk.

Of course, MTR spokesman Lincoln Leong has been quick to say that any development in Australia would not be like what has been described as fortress like developments in Hong Kong such as the new Tung Chung station and the housing project above and around it. As part of the expansion of the MTR out toward the new HK airport, Tung Chun is made up of 12,000 flats, 97 houses, a hotel and a shopping center. Other projects like this might be the Tseung Kwan O new town, which Chow argues is a more sophisticated model of integrated transport and urban development undertaken simultaneously. (see Image X).

TOD in Australia has typically been limited to either a strategic re-zoning along existing rail corridors where small parcels of land are taken up by individual developers as land is up zoned to accommodate a greater residential density. For example, this can be seen along the 1920’s rail corridor that runs up the spine of the North Shore in Sydney. Since re-zoning for density a decade ago, the rail corridor has seen a considerable number of new apartment buildings undertaken by developers. Because of the challenges of land acquisition and the difficulty of the amalgamation of lots, this has primarily been done in a piecemeal way of small blocks, the consequence being through time, considerable density, with none of the collective amenity that one would expect of a project of this scale undertaken by a single developer or government agency in a single development. This is density done on the occasion of transport, argued in terms of health, transport and sustainability considerations with none of the socio spatial intelligence at work in it that one would expect given the inheritance of reasoning via the NU.

CONCLUSION

The scale of neighborhood reasoned through the twentieth century has cultivated and defined our collective lives in an imperfect set of relationships held in a kind of tension of constant rectification. As this paper has shown, there is a rich bed of socio spatial political reasoning at work in urbanism.
through the twentieth century regarding the relationship of work, home, transport and leisure through twentieth urbanism which rely on diagrams that incite disagreement and cultivate arguments over who and what we are collectively. Blinding us to the failures of the TOD model to contribute to this in the production of housing density and city building, are all of the clearly beneficial aspects of TOD: in terms of health, environmental and social sustainability, novel models and techniques of funding and the cultivation of walkable, convivial urban environments. This paper is not an argument against TOD as much as it is an argument for more socio-spatial content in the TOD model, content that perhaps can’t be provided without government subsidy and involvement.

REFERENCES

1 This is a change in understanding of cities that is starting to transform mortgage consumption patterns and housing demands in Alpha cities around the world. See J.F Kelly, B. Weidmann, and M. Walsh, "The Housing We'd Choose," (Grattan Institute Melbourne, 2011).
2 One notable exception to this is literature around the relationship of Social Capital and TOD, see particularly Md Kamruzzaman et al., "Patterns of Social Capital Associated with Transit Oriented Development," Journal of Transport Geography 35, no. February (2014).
3 During the late nineteenth century and at the same time that urban theorists such as Ebenezer Howard were developing novel spatial links between economy, the social and the natural world through planning, Sir Ebenezer Howard, To-Morrow, a Peaceful Path to Real Reform (London: Swan, Sonnenschein and Co., 1898); Garden Cities of To-Morrow, ed. F.J Osborne (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1962 (1902)). there also was emerging ideas via the social sciences that provided new theoretical links between social relations and interaction and the physical environment of cities and towns. The Chicago School sociologists such as Robert Park and Ernest Burgess produced a significant body of literature bringing together the idea of constituting culture through the relationship of community and geography. Ernest Burgess, "Can Neighbourhood Work Have a Scientific Basis?," in The City, ed. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1925).

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