Are Placemakers the high-priests of a new religion?

David Engwicht

In this article:

— The connection between religion and planning

— The true nature of spirituality

— When planning and place making becomes fundamentalist

— Finding a legitimate role for planning and place making

(An updated version of a paper delivered to *Lost in Space QCAN Conference* October 1999)

The connection between religion and planning

For the first 38 years of my life I was a Christian fundamentalist. My father was a Pentecostal preacher, as was I. After leaving the church, I quickly realized that fundamentalism wears many cloaks other than just religion. One of those cloaks is urban planning and place making (the design professions that shape public space).

Some years back I undertook a major research project looking at the connection between religion and urban planning.* At first I was surprised to find that, since the emergence of the very first cities, urban planner and priest/astrologer have been one and the same profession. It was the priesthood in Ur in 5000 B.C. who planned the spectacular setting of this city. In Egypt it was the priesthood of the sun god Ra that drove the public works program that gave us the pyramids. The Harappan cities in the Indian subcontinent in 2154-1864 B.C. were all designed by the Harappan priesthood according to 32 divinely inspired patterns of city building laid out in books of architecture called the mandala. In China, it was the disciples of Feng Shui, 'whose job is to study and expound the shapes which the spiritual forces of nature have produced and to prescribe the ways in which all buildings, roads, bridges, canals and railways must conform to them' (Hall, Cities of Tomorrow 1988: 82). In the deserts of the Middle East, Yawah revealed to Moses the detailed blueprint for the Jewish temple and the entire layout and zoning of their tent city. The early Christians saw salvation as the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven. The apostle John gave the exact layout of this city, complete with the details of the number of gates and the materials these would be constructed from. At the turn of the twentieth century we had the emergence of the modern town planning movement which was founded firmly on the Biblical view of the city as inherently evil and the cesspool of sexual sin (Sodom, Gomorrah and Babylon) but potentially redeemable through sacred geometry (New Jerusalem). There were four major "high-priests" of the modern town planning movement, each with their own theological beliefs which shaped their vision of the utopian city. For example, Le Corbusier, father of the Radiant City vision, was a Calvinist who believed that everything was preordained by God. For Corbusier, the watchmaker God requires absolute order in a godly city, even to the point where all furniture must be standardized.

This connection between religion and place making should not surprise us. Since the first dawning of consciousness, humans have wanted to know their place in the universe. It was the job of the seers, shamans, priests, mystics, holy men and astrologers to peer into the meaningless chaos of the universe, and from that chaos discern order and meaning. That meaning and order had to be given shape for it to be communicated to others. They fashioned this discerned meaning into stories, rituals, sacred shapes, and the

layout of their homes, streets, temples and cities.

The geometric shapes and religious rituals provided reassurance that there is meaning in the universe. There was no such comfort in chaos. (Chaos science had not been discovered then.) The significance of much of the imposition of order on city form was primarily an act of defining identity and creation of a sense of certainty about that identity. As Aaron Wildavsky said: 'Planning is not so much a subject for the social scientist as for the theologian.'

Urban planners and place makers are often shocked to hear that they are involved in a profession with such a strong religious tradition. But this ignores the very nature of what planners and placemakers are trying to do. Like the priest astrologer of the ancient cities, they are creating order from disorder. They are meaning-makers, whether they consciously accept this role or not. And everything they build, from street to public seat, becomes a text that overtly or covertly communicates their beliefs about life and the universe.

The true nature of 'spirituality'

Let me digress for one moment and discuss the nature of 'spirituality' and how it so easily gives rise to fundamentalism — for only then can we understand how planning and place making move so easily from meaning-making into a form of fundamentalism. I define spirituality as a feeling of connection to the 'life-force' of the universe – the deep impulse in nature to create order out of disorder, riotous life out of death. Humans have a deep desire to know and interact with this mysterious life-force. Our senses tell us that something magical is happening in the universe. We may look at a whale or a rose and contemplate how dark chaotic forces have somehow been harnessed and fashioned into fantastic creations that stimulate our senses. We may even contemplate the creative potential of our own brain with its fantastic ability to conjure meaning out of chaos. We are intrigued. We want answers. And our creative brains invent them.

But it is here that we encounter one of the great pitfalls of the creative genius of the human brain. Whatever systems of meaning-making we can construct in our heads, they will only ever be dim reflections of the reality outside our heads. There is a strong temptation in the human psyche to embrace and deify the image we have created in our head rather than the reality it dimly reflects. The embracing of the image provides a sense of comfort and certainty that is not found by continuing to peer into the dark void knowing that we can never truly 'know'. In the search to 'know', true spirituality accepts all answers as stepping-stones to even greater mysteries. The human tendency is to turn the stepping stone into a final destination — a resting place. It is at this point we move into a form of fundamentalism — the belief that our current system of meaning-making is all embracing and final. Sure, we may change our belief system from time to time, but we simply move from one form of fundamentalism to another, changing the stepping stone into our temple of certainty.

True spirituality therefore contains a deep paradox. It is an act of meaning-making but at the same time an embracing of mystery and non-meaning. True spirituality tears down the temple of certainty it constructed yesterday. Fundamentalism embraces only the meaning-making and defends with its life-blood the temples of certainty it constructs.

True spirituality therefore demands great courage. It requires us to open ourselves to ambiguity and uncertainty, to the chaotic and unplanned. It requires us to embrace the unknowability of the universe and indeed our own death and non-being. On the other hand, fundamentalism is a grasp for certainty. It

strips away the complexity of the universe and embraces a simplified, mono-dimensional model of that universe. It rationalizes paradox and embraces one side or other of that paradox. It lives in the world of the 'known' and is not concerned with the unknown. In so doing it loses a passion for exploring the unknown and replaces it with a passion for defending the 'known'.

When planning and place making becomes fundamentalist

This grasp for certainty is manifested strongly in our urban form. Urban planning has gone so far as to create one singular, rationalized meaning for almost every space in the city. Streets are for moving cars. Shopping malls are for commercial exchange. Industrial estates are for manufacture and storing of goods. This delivers high levels of certainty about what we can expect where. The zoning and regulations are 'gospel'. They tell us about the one true meaning of a space.

Richard Sennett in *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity in City Life* (1971) argues that disorder threatens personal identity by exposing a person to experiences and information which may call the beliefs and assumptions of that identity into question. Planning is an attempt to control this exposure to disorder, and in so doing create a 'purified identity'.

There may be a temptation for more localized place makers and public artworkers to think that they are not in the same league as urban planners. But what the urban planner does at the macro scale the place maker often does at the micro scale. Too often they contribute to a space having a singular, defined story. They conspire unwittingly in the stripping away of complexity, ambiguity, conflict and the clash of paradox. They help create a fundamentalist statement on the meaning of a particular space and hence the meaning of the community that use that space. They help create a purified identity.

Finding a legitimate role for planning and place making

Does this mean that urban designers, place makers and artworkers should not become involved in the creation of public space? Not at all. What it does mean is that these people bear a heavy responsibility to create spaces that encapsulate the paradox of true spirituality which is a constant dialogue between the known and the unknown, order and disorder, meaning and ambiguity, commonality and dissonance, the inner world and the outer world. One of the mysteries of life is that creative energy is released and whole new worlds spin into existence where these paradoxical worlds are not rationalized but are allowed to clash head on.

Someone once said that a space does not become a place until it is used for a purpose not intended by the designer. I once saw a piece of exercise equipment, a sit-up bench, that the Bolder, Colorado city council had placed on the side of a walking trail. A woman was stretched on the bench reading a book. In so doing, she refused to accept the 'story' that the designer intended this bench to tell. Instead she told her own story about the bench and used it for the exact opposite purpose intended by the designer; relaxation rather than exercise. In so doing she removed the machine stamp from this environment and made the space her own, creating a sense of place and home.

This gives us a clue as to the art of place making. We must create spaces in which people can create their own meaning and tell their own stories. They must be spaces that provoke an internal dialogue between paradoxical worlds. And design matters very much in whether this dialogue is encouraged or squashed.

Loose chairs instead of chairs that are nailed down help people create their own space and tell their own stories. Opportunities for people watching encourages a meeting between people's internal world and the external world. The placement of buildings can be crucial in defining a stage upon which the drama of public life can be played out. Even the placement of doors and windows in buildings is important in encouraging people to write their own stories about public space.

It is true that urban designers, place makers and artworkers are storytellers. But if their story becomes the only story told by a public space, then they are imposing a form of fundamentalism on the entire community. Their primary job is to create spaces of dialogue. Their job is to nudge people out of their zone of certainty into a dialogue with the unknown and unknowable. It is to help them break the shackles of the 'fundamentalist rational adult' and rekindle the spirit of the child, storyteller, jester and mystic. It is to put people in communion with the wild, unpredictable 'life-force' of the universe.

While the physical needs for security and food cannot be dismissed as formative elements in the construct of the city, the need to create order and meaning were dominant from the beginning. But if the meaning and order we create are turned into temples of certainty, we enter a world of fundamentalism where the creative spirit is chained.

* Sections of this article have been condensed from an original reseach paper, *The Connection Betwen Religion and Planning* (25 pages). It can be downloaded here.