

The identity of a city

By Dan Ionescu and Ralf Korbmacher

About half of the world's population currently lives in cities or towns. Why? And why are so many more eager to join them? Can economic opportunities alone account for this migration? Or are there other motivations at play?

A few preliminary considerations are in good order before attempting to answer these questions:

1. The fulfillment of any human being's potential is limited, in principle, only by (life)time and (ever more scarcely) material resources.

2. Most human beings are instinctively driven to maximize their potential, either as a requirement for survival (freedom from) or out of ambition (freedom to), and the concentration of functions in and around cities or towns still provides a substantial advantage for individual fulfillment over rural settlements.

3. Different urban environments offer varying degrees of opportunity for individual fulfillment, but most surpass rural environments in opportunities on offer, because the quantitative advantage (density) provides substantial support for the qualitative advantage (choice).

Based on these premises, migration to cities makes perfect sense, and is arguably likely to continue well into the future, provided quantitative growth doesn't backfire. Since current population growth trends are likely to sustain a demand greater than supply, from a marketing perspective it is in the best interest of cities and towns to articulate a vision that will attract the best and brightest.

Examples of cities and towns with a clear vision abound. Though several factors — from the size of the settlement at the "design phase" to migratory pressures or immediate political interests — often hinder the fulfillment of these visions, it is better to have them than to leave growth to Darwinian forces such as social and economic pressures or even outdated regulations — "SmartCodes" included.

So what can or should a city or town aim for when defining a vision? Historically, nature supplied the determining factors: geography, topography, availability of water and other resources and — last but not least — inspiration. But the ever more pressing demands of capital shifted the focus toward rationalization of city development and



Dan Ionescu



Ralf Korbmacher

design to meet market requirements: examine the competitive context, identify an unmet need, or one that the cultural and natural circumstances of a given human settlement put within relatively easy reach, and you have a blueprint for a vision — returning to the beginning of this argument, to define what one wants a city or town to stand for, bearing in mind that it "cannot be all things to all people."

Or can it?

Common business sense suggests that nothing and nobody can "be all things to all people." But cities and towns reach a critical mass at which common

business sense doesn't always make perfect sense.

Firstly, the investment required to develop a city or a town to its maximum social, cultural and even natural potential hardly justifies hedging all bets on the single-minded purpose most business and marketing practice would think appropriate. At this scale, there's too much risk in "putting all the eggs in one basket," staking the future against the hardly controllable factors of worldwide competition, economic cycles, flukes of nature, etc. Add to that, the fact that marketing communications are increasingly bespoke and directed to specific audiences with specialized interests, and it becomes clear that it would actually be wasteful to develop a single-minded value proposition for a city or town. So, "can't be all things to all people" starts looking like "be the thing to as many interest groups as possible."

Secondly, the more developed an individual becomes, the more she or he is interested in broadening his or her horizons to live a more fulfilling life. Cities or towns have to compete like any other collective for talent, and retaining this talent is where the real challenge is. Offering as much as possible in both depth and breadth of opportunity becomes critical. While specialization — be it in one "discipline" or many — is necessary to have something to talk about and claim a city's place on the world map, it is not enough to retain a long-term talent pool. So to "be the thing to as many interest groups as possible," we must add "be almost everything

Guest perspective

to as many people as possible."

Where to from here?

The identity of the greatest cities and towns is a complex layering of multiple value propositions that defy common marketing and business practice. Some of these cities have been blessed with natural advantages that seemed to make their success inevitable. But history and the ruins it has left behind provide obvious lessons that you can never try too hard to keep a city at the top of its game.

Many architects bemoan the fact that the life span of buildings is exponentially decreasing, shifting the capital requirement of their existence from the building phase to maintenance throughout their — increasingly short — useful life. Wherein previous centuries buildings were simply adapted to new uses as needs arose, the complexity of modern infrastructure has tipped the balance in favor of more ephemeral structures.

Unless cities are also to become ephemeral places that will give way to "a better mousetrap" within a few or even a single generation, their vision and the ensuing identity, must aspire to be as universal as possible. Along the way, the mission will need to adjust to all the externalities outside the city's reach, designing milestone value propositions that will keep their lights burning bright, come what may.

The alternative would be to rethink the very meaning of a city as a concentrated spot for dwelling and exchange, a tempting proposition at a time in which capital and talent have acquired unprecedented mobility. The final — and probably still unanswerable — question would be "what is most likely sustainable into the future: the city as we know it, the city-as-campsite or some other form of 'occupation' of our planet we cannot yet envision?"

Dan Ionescu is the founder and principal of Dan Ionescu Architects & Planners (DIAP) and DIAP-Strategic Planning Group (DIAP-SPG). Ralf Korbmacher is an identity architect with DIAP's Strategic Planning Group and a founding partner of 7memoranda.

Oh deer

Our recently planted Fuji apple tree was doing so well. Tucked in the corner of our yard, just near the neighbor's box elder tree, it was generating leaves and had its first tiny apple on it. I was looking forward to watching that apple grow, just as I do any initial fruit from a new tree.



JON MAYS

But then, the massacre. From the back window, I saw something amiss. The tree looked bare. Perhaps it was an optical illusion. Perhaps the leaves of the tree next to it were camouflaging it. Upon closer inspection, not only was the little apple gone, but nearly all of the tree's leaves were too. It had been pilfered. Shorn. Mangled. But by who, or what? We had just constructed a planter box nearby and three of the lettuce plants were also equally shorn. Since we live near the San Mateo Creek on the edge of downtown San Mateo, our yard sometimes acts as an expressway for raccoons who venture through the yard on their way to their waterfront homes. But this one seemed different. How could a raccoon balance itself on the slight tree enough to eat the leaves? Its weight would likely tip it over. It was a mystery. And though it was discouraging to see the apple tree and the lettuce in such states, it is the way of the world and the way of the garden. Some things make it, some don't.

The next morning, while I was making breakfast, my wife spotted two visitors to our yard also enjoying breakfast — deer. I've heard of encounters with deer near Skyline, in Hillsborough, San Carlos, San Mateo Highlands and Belmont, but never east of El Camino Real and definitely not near the edge of downtown. But there were a couple deer, not only snacking on the plums that had fallen from our tree, but our overgrown chard. We watched them for a little, but then the novelty wore off when I realized we had a nice little deer buffet in our backyard and that my gardening hobby might be for naught if these deer remained. After reflecting upon the fact that our house is not nearly nice enough to be pilaged by deer, I gently urged them through the gaping hole in our fence I had removed two weeks prior in preparation for a new fence (the hole, I readily admit, was the whole reason for this particular visit). Off to the creek, I believed they went as we marveled at the oddity.

A few hours later, my wife spotted one again in the backyard. This time it was snacking on our orange tree planted about two years ago. Enough. We bought temporary fencing and closed off the area. This, I hope, will do the trick.

But is it really so weird to have deer near downtown on the other side of El Camino Real and the railroad tracks? A quick call to Scott Delucchi at the Peninsula Humane Society confirmed it. Yes. There are usually reports of deer near Interstate 280 and State Route 92, but usually in the fall when it is mating season. In the flatlands, not so much. So chalk this one up to a couple of lost deer trying to make their way in San Mateo. Or maybe, just maybe, word has gotten out in the animal kingdom about the quality of the buffet in our little section of paradise.

Delucchi also informs me that there were 23 dogs brought to PHS after the Independence Day holiday — about twice the number after a typical long weekend. About three of the dogs were reconnected with their owners nearly right away. Dogs are particularly sensitive to fireworks and can run away because of the stress of the holiday celebrations. About 15 people were waiting at PHS as it opened yesterday morning looking for their dogs and one owner even spotted their dog as someone else was bringing it in. "They said, 'hey, that's my dog,'" Delucchi said.

It made for a busy day at the PHS, but they're happy to help lost dogs find their way back home. Now, about those deer ...

Jon Mays is the editor in chief of the Daily Journal. He can be reached at jon@smdailyjournal.com.

Letter to the editor

Punishing the rich

Editor,

Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton is the most recent in a long line of Democrats to blame the rich for our troubles. The current Democratic mantra is taxing the rich to bring the economy back. It is popular to want to

punish the rich. However, the rich are not the cause of our economic problems. The cause of our economic woes is spending more than we take in. By the Democrats' own admission, taxing the rich will not turn the economy around. The best they can come up with is that taxing the rich will make us feel good.

We need jobs to get the economy running again. Who creates jobs? The rich people!

Keith De Filippis
San Jose

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