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Thompson, M.

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Michael Thompson

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INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR APPLIED SYSTEMS ANALYSIS
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PLANNING AND ANTI-PLANNING: 2 SIDES OF A COUNTERFEIT COIN

Michael Thompson

To understand the failure of high-rise housing in Britain we need to look at its polar opposite – the success of low-rise housing in Venezuela. Developing countries tend to look to developed countries for advice and the developed countries, for their part, are usually only too happy to oblige. So natural does this unequal relationship between metropolis and periphery appear that the possibility that expertise might also flow in the reverse direction -- from deferential pupil to paternalistic teacher -- is not even considered. More is the pity.

When it comes to housing and urban planning, Venezuela has traditionally looked to Britain as its mentor and its first cadre in this field, in the years just after the Second World War,learnt their trade in the labyrinthine offices of the London County Council (the L.C.C.). In Venezuela's rapid oil-fuelled economic expansion during the Fifties and Sixties the capital, Caracas, blossomed with underpasses, roundabouts

and high-rise housing in a tropical profusion such as would have gladdened the temperate heart of any official in County Hall (the headquarters of the LCC). But, even then, they could not solve all their "problems". Despite its scale, Caracas' housing programme was no match for the massive influx of poor migrants from the surrounding countryside.

Illegal squatter settlements – horrendous teeming shanty towns – sprang up on steep city centre hillsides and on land further out that had been earmarked for other purposes. Many of these settlements, though illegal, are still there and, in ten years or less, the original shacks have been extended and rebuilt many times over until now the wooden poles and flattened-out oil-drums have given way to neat and comfortable three-storeyed brick houses. The local authorities, faced with a *fait accompli* have given up trying to evict the squatters and now wrestle with a different problem -- how to lay services along the higgledy-piggledy alleyways of these up-and-coming districts. But the next generation of squatters have managed to solve that problem as well. Knowing that sooner or later they will be in a position to negotiate paved roads and main services in exchange for votes, and having learnt that bureaucracies tend to think in straight lines, they now begin by laying out their squalid settlements on a rigid grid pattern that will ultimately ensure the highest possible number of votes per metre of sewerage pipe.

Meanwhile, back in the high-rise housing that was built at great public expense, things have been getting worse and worse. It is not easy to keep pigs and hens in a sixteenth floor apartment especially when the lifts no longer operate and, with such odds against them, the inhabitants, the livestock and the buildings themselves have all suffered. As an

exercise in the transfer of expertise it could scarcely be bettered; the rate of decline of the Venezuelan high-rise housing has matched, and in some cases has even exceeded, that achieved in Britain.

But what is the lesson that can, and should, flow in the reverse direction -- from Venezuela to Britain? Is it the anti-planners' message that any planning is always bound to be worse than no planning at all? Is it the *laissez faire* doctrine that, if you leave people to their own devices, the free operation of the market will do more to help them than anything else? Is it that the advanced industrialized nations should abandon all public housing provision and dismantle the whole structure of the welfare state so that the poor and the homeless will eventually be forced to build driftwood shanty towns on the Essex marshes? Is it that the visitation (upon a small proportion of the population) of epidemics unknown since the Middle Ages, and of an infant mortality rate not matched even in the darkest and most satanic mills of the Industrial Revolution, is something to be actively encouraged?

No, the lesson has to do, not with the levels of misery and comfort at which people live, but with the direction of change of those levels. If we only take the trouble to look we will see that in Venezuela there are two very different kinds of slums -- the high-rise blocks that start off good and get worse and worse, and the low-rise squatter settlements that start off hideously bad and get better and better. But this is not to say that *all* high-rise housing gets worse and worse or that *all* shanty-towns get better and better; there are successes and failures on both sides. The lesson is simply that slums can come in two forms, *downward slums* and *upward slums*. With downward slums the problems get worse and worse; with

upward slums the problems, though appalling to start with, eventually just go away.

The anti-planners are often right when they point out that many planning solutions (such as high-rise public housing) create downward slums and, in consequence, are just a way of spending a great deal of money to make things worse than they were before, but this blanket rejection of planning would only be valid if that was all that planning could *ever* do. If planners could encourge upward slums to rise more quickly and, better still, if they could help to transform some downward slums into upward slums, that would be something else altogether. The anti-planners may be right but, at present, their case is not proven. If Venezuela can help us to resolve this question then it will have done a great deal more for the metropolis than the metropolis ever did for it, especially if it turns out that the anti-planners are wrong.

There is, of course, no shortage of radical solutions based on the literal transplantation of upward slum techniques into the urban and social fabric of Britain. Self-build is now actively canvassed by a generation of architectural students that has rejected the ideology of the Modern Movement lock, stock and barrel; anarchic architectural historians point to the lessons we could learn from the permissive planning regulations that enabled thousands of working-class East-Enders to build a better life for themselves, stage by gradual stage, in the Essex countryside; the Ruff Tuff Cream Puff Estate Agency (a squatter's information service operating under the slogan "open up the tin and let the people in") has shown many a professional malcontent, and many the scion of a bourgeois suburban dynasty, how to help themselves to the under-utilized

housing stock of the inner city. All these solutions have *something* to contribute but their contributions are essentially those of the gadfly -- they sting, irritate and provoke the somnolent bureaucratic beast but they do not tell it which way it should charge. Before we can tell it that we will have to learn our Venezuelan lesson.

Since our industrial revolution and its accompanying migration from the countryside to the towns happened a long time ago, it might seem that the Venezuelan experience has little relevance for us; it might seem that we do not have any upward slums. Certainly, few if any shanty towns are to be found springing up in St. James's Park or along the verges of the M1, but it is to parallels between social processes rather than to the physical manifestations of those processes that we should be looking.

It was in those parts which, to his dismay, the Venezuelan planner found he could not reach that the upward slums -- the shanty towns – materialized. the steep hillsides of the city centre and the "green field sites" at its margins were all hatched in in various coloured inks on the planner's maps and the squatters, when they moved onto those sites, were "nonconforming users" to a man. It is just that the planner's ambition had o'erleapt itself and that, to his acute embarrassment, the felt-tip pen had proved nowhere near as mighty as the self-help sword. So, rather than looking in vain for tell-tale traces of British shanty towns, we should see if we can find areas of Britain to which the planners have laid claim but which they have been unable to control. Where in Britain have the nonconforming users been able to continue in their nonconformity? The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is "the inner city".

The trendy hinterland of Regent's Park, the St. John's Wood streets (so handy for the American School and the new mosque!), the canalside Regency villas of Little Venice, the Georgian terraces and garden squares of Islington...Camden Passage with its antique shops and its renowned restaurants, have not always been viewed as wonderful urban assets* and to understand what the official perception of these areas once was we will need to journey back in time to those years just after the Second World War when Venezuela's first batch of apprentice planners were learning their trade at the LCC.

Among the most senior of their mentors was one, Harold P. Clunn, whose love of London so far transcended the bounds of municipal duty as to lead him to write a monumental guidebook to the city --*The Face of London*. In it the centre of London is described in minute detail by means of a series of "walks" in which Mr. Clunn points out all the interesting buildings along the way, pausing occasionally to expatiate enthusiastically on how a roundabout will be formed at this junction here and a modern four-lane highway driven through that decaying area there.

Today anyone eccentric enough to wander around the city with this vast tome clutched to his chest would be astounded to discover that all the buildings he would like to know about (all the Georgian houses in Bloomsbury, for instance) do not rate a mention whilst all those which he probably wishes were not there (Adastral House in Theobald's road, for instance) are described in excruciating detail. One gets the impression

*For example, this how Camden Passage was perceived thirty years ago: '(Islington High Street's) east side is marred by several shabby island blocks of buildings extending from opposite Liverpool Road to Islington Greet. Some day, if a progressive Borough Council can find ways and means of purchasing these buildings, they might be pulled down and public gardens laid out on this site.' (Clunn p. 342).

that Mr. Clunn simply did not see large tracts of the city he wrote about or, rather, that he deliberately refused to see them.

Now, of course, since Mr. Clunn is as entitled to his opinions as is the next man, we may be tempted to put all this down to differences of taste and, as we are always telling ourselves, there is no accounting for those! Quite so; Mr. Clunn's likes and dislikes are as valid as anyone else's but this is not what is at issue. Mr. Clunn is not just *anyone* -- he was, at the time he was writing, a highly-placed official in the London County Council and the trouble is that, in consequence, his likes and dislikes became *more* valid than anyone else's. Today's visitor, no matter how keen he may be to see the buildings that Mr. Clunn refused to see, can see only a small proportion of those to which Mr. Clunn closed his eyes in the 1940's. He cannot see then, try as he may, because they are not there to be seen and the question to which we should address ourselves is: 'is there, perhaps, some connection between Mr. Clunn refusing to see them then and their not being here to be seen now?'

The answer is an emphatic "yes". Planning, unlike the softer social sciences, is based upon immutable natural laws. One, which underpins what is called "location theory" and which explains the routes taken by urban motorways, is that the best soil conditions are always to be found in working class areas. Another, which furnishes the theoretical basis for the epidemiology of Planners' Blight, is that if a planner says that an area is decayed and it is not, it soon will be.

Mr. Clunn's view of London is everywhere suffused with the utopian planning wisdom of his day and one of the charms of his labour-of-love guidebook is that it provides us with a rare insight into the sort of

perception that sustained that wisdom. Unremarkable though that perception might have been in the 1930's, and through into the 1950's, it seems scarcely credible now. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that it is the complete reversal -- the negative - of the way we now see our city; everything he ignored we now cherish, everything he enthused over we now despise ... what was then the brightest jewel in his LCC's crown -- the White City Estate* -- is now the most notorious "sink estate" of them all.

It is like flicking through a 1950's copy of *Ideal Home* and seeing the helpful advice that the then arbiters of taste were giving to young marrieds about to set up home on a shoe-string: Such clever things to do with Victorian junk -- take this old circular dining table, throw the base away, fit these three Festival of Britain legs to the top and, presto, a contemporary coffee table. How the children must now wish that their struggling parents had put the bases of all those mahogany dining tables away in the attic instead of doing as they were told and throwing them on the rubbish dump! And then we realize that Mr. Clunn has been throwing away the bases, not of a few sticks of furniture, but of our capital city.

If the perception we now have is the correct one, then the only conclusion we can draw is that planners should either do nothing at all or else they should do the exact opposite of what they think they should do. But then (awful thought) is it not possible that the perception we now have will, fifty years hence, seem as ludicrously inverted as does Mr. Clunn's now? Such conclusions and such doubts, if taken seriously, would have a paralysing effect on members of the planning professions. Torn

*Clunn page 10.

between wondering whether what they want to do is *really* what they want to do or the exact opposite of what they want to do, and all the time fearful of doing anything for fear that anything they do is bound to be wrong, they would seem to have no option but to settle into permanent and total immobility. But there is still one way out of this *impasse* ... if only we can begin to understand the processes by which perceptions are formed and transformed.

It is here that the Venezuelan lesson will prove invaluable, for it turns out that the upward slums of Caracas are, to the student of planning, what the Michelson-Morley experiment was to Einstein. Tucked away in some remote, and all-too-easily ignored corner, we find some puzzling and unpalatable data. Just as Newton's laws of motion broke down when some velocities approached the speed of light, so the laws of planning break down in the *barriadas* of Latin America. In the battle of perceptions the planners, for once and contrary to all the rules, do not come out on top.

The individual squatters, as they build their illegal shacks, do not look too far beyond their nose-ends; they know that they have no legal title to the land they occupy and that such little control as they are able to exercise over their environment derives, not from their inalienable rights (for they have none), but from their inertia. Their security of tenure is directly proportional to the effort that would have to be made to remove them.* The fact that they have little by way of capital to invest in their ramshackle homes causes them little dismay; after all, what would

*Both their individualism and their insecurity are confirmed by the fact that, in the early stages, a member of the family has to be in the house at all times to prevent it being taken over by another homeless family.

be the point of ploughing money into a house that may be flattened by a bulldozer tomorrow with no legal redress? But, with each day that passes, with each room that is added, with each tin wall that is rebuilt in extruded clay block ... with each load of hard-core infill, that inertia increases and, as their capital investment mounts little by little, so their perceptions of events in time and space also increase.

The perceptions of these ragged-trousered entrepreneurs may not be very wide-ranging but they are impressively realistic; perception and control advance gradually hand-in-hand neither getting too far ahead of the other. In consequence, their style of operation is flexible and pragmatic -- they do not go in for committing resources irreversibly to the pursuit of distant ideological goals for the simple reason that their intensely practical perceptions do not leap that far ahead of their ability to control their external world. Operating in this down-to-earth and piecemeal way, and mercifully free of any doctrinaire commitment to just one kind of progress defined in terms of just one single distant goal, they remain resilient and adaptable -- they can react quickly to forestall any adverse changes in their situation and to exploit those that afford some unexpected opportunity -- and they learn very quickly. As they drag themselves up by their own bootstraps their impotence falls away and they become shrewd and effective manipulators capable even of arranging themselves into straight lines, not because they like straight lines, but because they have learnt that this is the way to manipulate the local authorities. How very different are these perceptions from those of Mr. Clunn.

Mr. Clunn is on the side of Progress and he has his eyes firmly fixed on a very distant and very glorious New Jerusalem.

> London ... is marching on to a destiny which will make it the grandest city in the whole world. It is indeed a victory of civilization, ... The new London will be a shining monument to the fortitude and enterprise of its inhabitants. It will be a city of fine wide streets and avenues with traffic roundabouts, of majestic vistas, beautiful parks, squares and riverside gardens, attractive suburbs with all the amenities of self-contained towns.*

This is omelette-making on the heroic scale and Mr. Clunn is going to have to crack more than a few eggs in the process. In fact, he lines up whole basketsfull ready for the great fry-up and one of these baskets contains nothing less than the entire man-made fabric of the inner city:

> London must be allowed to grow upwards and the straggling villas and small houses of Highbury, Barnsbury, Stoke Newington, Hackney, Maida Vale and St. John's Wood, must give way to new blocks of flats.**

But where, we might ask, is this great omelette – this shining monument? In all this vast urban swathe just one high-rise block of flats (appropriately enough, beside the new traffic roundabout at Highbury Corner) has grown upwards and thousands of those small houses and straggling villas are still standing. Have these eggs proved too tough to crack or is it that they just have not been cracked yet? Well the answer is that they are not

*Clunn pp. 16-17.
**Clunn p. 10.

going to be cracked; the omelette-making has been cancelled. Though the planner has declared that the whole inner city area is decayed, yet it has not decayed; the second law of planning has broken down, not just in Venezuela, but in the centre of London as well. How can this have happened?

Without his realizing it, Mr. Clunn's perceptions, taking wings unto themselves and lured on by that grandiose glittering goal, passed way beyond the limits of even his considerable control. Sensing an opportunity, London's equivalent of the Venezuelan squatters quietly persisted in their nonconformity and, stage by gradual stage, transformed acre upon acre of supposedly rat-infested slum into glorious heritage. As their control increased so their perceptions advanced until they reached the realistic point at which they could even begin to manipulate the local authorities. Of course, it was not roads, sewers, piped water and mains electricity that they were after -- they already had those; it was designation as a Conservation Area, listing as being of architectural and historical interest, residents' parking, new iron railings around the parks, and anti-dogshit notices on the lamp-posts that they were after. And they got them. Just one of those little eggs destined for the Clunn omelette -- just one of those straggling villas in St.John's Wood tastefully restored and, as the estate agents say, extensively refurbished -- could now set you back £ 250,000.

What has happened in the inner city is that some of its downward slums have changed into upward slums, and the ridiculously obvious conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the fact that such a thing has happened is proof that it is possible. In the normal course of our day-to-

day life such conclusions are so obvious that they do not need to be stated; if something happens then, of course, it is possible. When we consider questions of possibility we usually wrestle with the altogether knottier problem of whether something that has not happened can happen. Only the historian of science and the anthropologist bother themselves about the obvious. The historian of science bothers because, time and time again, he sees the scientific community going to great lengths to ignore the fact that something (like the Michelson-Morley experiment) has happened. Invariably the reason is that, according to the then current theory about how the world works, it was not possible for such a thing to happen. The anthropologist is often priviledged to see this process taken one step further; he sees people acting in the world in such a way that their actions actually prevent something that otherwise would have happened from happening. Both the historian of science and the anthropologist could have themselves a field-day in the inner city.

If the planners' control had not faltered, not one of those straggling villas in St. John's Wood would have survived long enough to be refurbished, Alan Bennett's Knockers-Through (and, indeed, Alan Bennett himself) would not have been able to find a single early Victorian terraced house to knock through, and a restaurantless Camden Passage would have been swept away and replaced by a municipal shrubbery while Robert Carrier was still just a PR man for the British Linoleum Corporation. None of what has happened would have happened if the planners had been able to exercise the degree of control to which they aspired, and this leads us to suspect that in the planner's book such transformations of downward slums into upward slums are not possible. Our

suspicions are well-founded; such transformations are not possible because, in the planners book, *there are only downward slums*.

* * *

The task now is to re-write the planner's book in the light of these two discoveries -- one, from Venezuela, that there are upward slums as well as downwards slums; the other, from London's inner suburbs, that the latter can sometimes be transformed into the former.

Planners share the commonsense view that as things are used they are used up. On this view, a building when new has a considerable economic value and a sizable expected life-span and, as the years go by, so that value deceases (in real terms) in line with the decrease in its expected useful life. Since a projected life-span of fifty years (typically) is one of the design criteria in any local authority brief, and since the levels of maintenance that subsequently are deemed reasonable are closely related to this predetermined span, everything conspires to ensure that the building behaves in the way it is expected to behave. After fifty years it will, if the architect has optimized his design, fall down of its own accord, and, even if it does not manage to demolish itself, "justifiable" maintenance will have decreased to such an extent that it will at least have become uninhabitable.

The inevitablity of such an outcome is enshrined in two graphs -- one showing the inexorable decline towards zero value as the building's life ebbs away, the other showing that the maintenance needed to ensure the

"artificial" prolongation of that life increases exponentially. These two graphs are to the build environment what Newton's laws of motion were to mechanics. Though they tend to be stated in naturalistic terms, they are not natural laws; they are articles of faith. They are statements, not of how the man-made world is, but of how it ought to be; and the faithful, basing their actions on these articles, have until recently proved remarkably successful in getting the reality to conform to the ideal.

One of the best ways of stopping people from doing something you do not want them to do is to insist that it is impossible to do it. A slightly weaker form of this same type of dissuasion is the insistence that to do such a thing, though perhaps possible, would be unnatural, or unreasonable, or simply counter to plain honest-to-goodness commonsense. "You would be banging your head against a brick wall", "it stands to reason" ... "use your commonsense", are some of the crash barriers that keep unruly human curiosity under social control. "Curiosity", as Granny used to say, "killed the cat" and, not wishing to succumb to the same fate, we soon learn to use our (by which we mean their) commonsense. Bluff commonsense is often just that -- a huge confidence trick designed to prevent us from seeing the full extent of the possible.

The commonsense ingredient in the planner's two graphs is that there is just one trend -- things get worse and they go on and on getting worse and worse. What has not been considered, because it flies in the face of commonsense , is that things, having got as bad as they can get, may begin to get better. A building that has reached its allotted span may, if it is permitted to linger on, begin to *increase* in value, and for some buildings the level of maintenance needed to stave off deterioration

may, instead of shooting off to infinity, eventually begin to level out. The theory that attempts to handle these bizarre possibilities is called Rubbish Theory.*

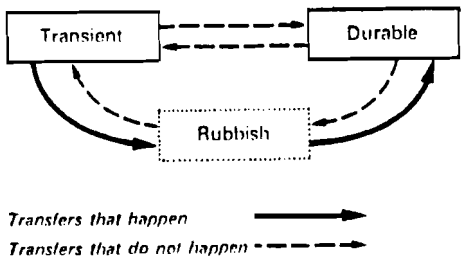
We are all familiar with the way despised Victorian objects have become sought-after antiques -- with bakelite Art-deco ashtrays that have become collector's items, with old bangers that reappear as vintage motor cars -- and the transformation of rat-infested slums into glorious heritage is but another example of this widespread and familiar process. Yet, though it goes on all the time, we really have no explanation of how it happens and, indeed, such theories that we do have often insist that such a thing cannot happen. Rubbish Theory attempts to make good this omission.

The basic idea in Rubbish Theory is that, when we take stock of our world, we are very selective; we only include those items that are of value -- anything that has no value is excluded. If we did not do this we could never complete our stocktaking. Those objects that we include fall into two categories: those that increase in value over time (the ***durable***) and those that decrease in value over time (the ***transient***). For some objects, such as Queen Anne walnut tallboys and second-hand Ford Cortinas, membership is self-evident -- they lie within a region of fixed assumptions. Other objects may not be so unequivocal and, by making a personal aesthetic commitment, we may be able to tip them one way or the other. Such flexibility is made possible by the existence of a third, unnoticed, category -- ***rubbish***. A transient object, declining in value, can sink into

*Thompson, Michael. 1979. Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value. Oxford University Press.

rubbish and then at some later date be discovered by some creative individual and transferred to durability. Just why some objects get transferred and others do not and just why some people are able to do this and others are not, are the intriguing questions that Rubbish Theory raises and tries to answer.

The basic hypothesis in Rubbish Theory can be represented by one simple little diagram that describes the ways in which objects may be transferred between these cultural categories.



Unfortunately, the very simplicity of this diagram tends to obscure the significance of what it is saying.

First of all, it is saying that objects do not have the qualities they have by virtue of their intrinsic physical properties. Their intrinsic physical properties are not irrelevant but they do not in themselves determine whether an object is assigned to a particular category. Rather, these qualities of transience, durability and rubbishness are *conferred* upon objects as a consequence of those objects being caught up in the process of social life. It is saying that the utilitarian or functionalist idea that people want things so as to keep body and soul together, whilst often true enough, is only a small and rather unimportant part of the story. It may explain why people want food but it says nothing about why some people

want smoked salmon and others salt-cod. To explain this we need the idea that, over and above the maintenance of their physical existence, people want things in order to sustain their social existence. There may be little to distinguish smoked salmon and salt-cod as far as calorific value is concerned but, when it comes to their social meanings, they can be poles apart.

Secondly, the transfer of an object from transience to rubbish and from rubbish to durability is subject, not to natural control (though natural processes are involved), but to social control. One clear example is the inexorable fifty year decline and eventual demolition of a building as a result of the control exercised by the planner. In this case, the controlled transfer is from transience to rubbish, with the possibility of any subsequent transfer to durability being removed by the physical removal of the building. Another example is the process by which a straggling villa that has lingered on is, as a result of having certain not very expensive operations carried out on it (at the right sort of time and by the right sort of person), is transformed into part of our glorious heritage. In this case, the controlled transfer is from rubbish to durability and, of course, a necessary condition for this to be possible is that the building should not be physically removed before it can be culturally transferred. So this second mode of control is in direct conflict with the first mode; the first mode insists that the building goes, the second that it stays. It is for this reason that we are only privileged to see this second kind of transformation -- the kind that flies in the face of commonsense -- at those times and in those places where the planner's perception has lost control.

So the whole process has to do, not with the intrinsic physical condition of the built environment, but with something else altogether: *the different ways in which that environment is perceived coupled with the ebb and flow of control between the holders of those different perceptions.* Present planning policy is essentially based on the formal elaboration of just one of these perceptions coupled with the systematic extension of its control. In other words, it is saying "this perception is right and all the others are wrong". Rubbish Theory suggests that planning could be something very different.

If we could say how many different kinds of perception were possible, and why it is that an individual should come to hold the perception that he holds, and what sorts of changes in that individual's situation are likely to result in his relinquishing that particular perception in favour of some other, then planning, by conceding the validity of all these different perceptions and by deliberately compensating for its own bias, could begin to concern itself with the *appropriateness* of these different perceptions at different times and in different places. In doing this planning would, of course, become a very different animal. Instead of a ruthless programme for the extermination of alien perceptions , it would become a gentle modifying framework for their judicious conservation.