

Beautiful Catastrophes

Lars Lerup

BEAUTIFUL CATASTROPHES

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Authorship: Research by Lars Lerup. Note: this text was written in 2006 and suffers therefore from both hind- and foresight. For example, I missed one other city that operates in tandem with the physical city – the Internet City – whose territory is endless but also devours endless amounts of electric energy and attention. Not to speak of the sudden turn to the right (and I'm not talking about traffic) –welcome to the catastrophic factor...

Futurism has much in common with fiction: interesting maybe, but hardly very effective at telling the future. Plus, reality – rather than futurism or fiction – has proven to be more interesting (and exciting) than either. This does not negate the value of the two lesser arts, but it may shift their use, particularly if we are tempted to employ predictions as planning tools. Thus, when I speculate on the future of cities, I must do so with this caveat: my future-speculations are umbilically bound to current reality. The future that I see as the projection of the real lacks one reproducible ingredient: the unpredictable that is embedded in the real and is essential to its very liveliness. This unpredictability – the *catastrophic factor* characteristic of all living events – may be what makes reality more interesting than fiction. The following therefore are mere projections, but done with an additional twist to compensate for my inability to recreate the catastrophic factor: done tongue-in-cheek or, more precisely, done without much forethought, catching glimpses of the future lazily from the corner of my eye.

My travels take me frequently back and forth along a specific route: from Houston to Newark (airport), to Stockholm (my hometown), then back to Houston before going on to Berkeley, California, where I have lived and worked on and off for many decades. In a state of idleness imposed by air travel, I have entertained many of my speculations, formulated en route and from the air, i.e., from a healthy distance. This oddly may make the speculations more interesting (at least I hope so) because they are not caught in the iron grip of professional logic.

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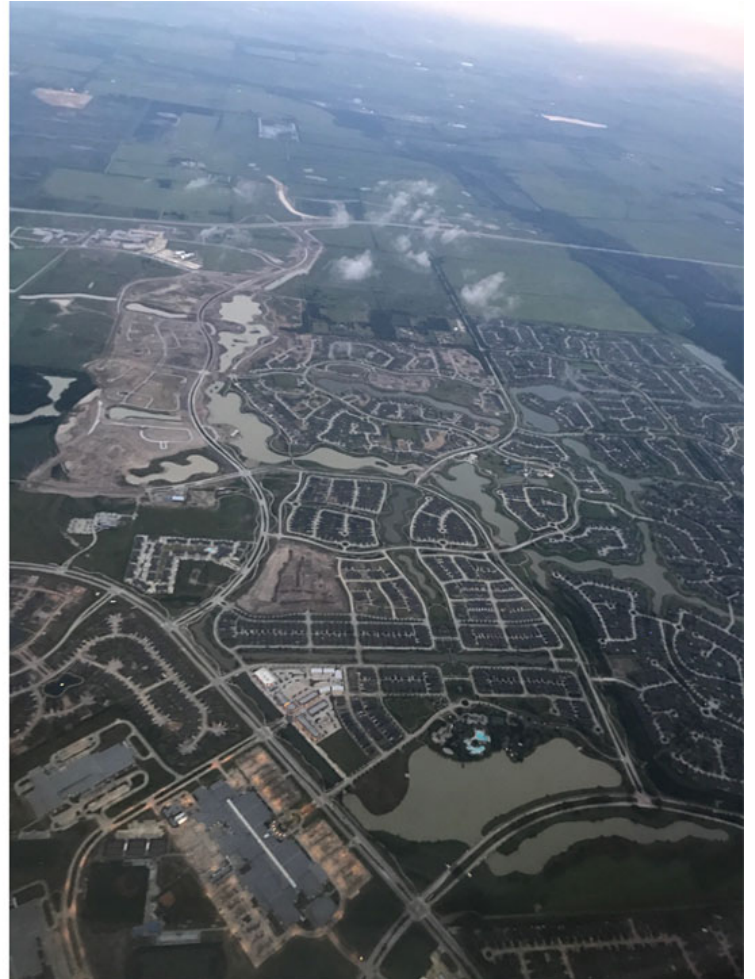
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The City of One

Flying west from George Bush International Airport in Houston, I look down on the seemingly endless deserts that are inscribed by the suburban hieroglyphics of freeways and curving streets that end in cul-de sacs, all holding little houses safely apart. These hieroglyphics spread out like some surface ailment driven by a relentless internal graphic logic without any sense of end or confining principle. This graphic projects a city of individuals – a City of One.

Here, government has been reduced to the Highway Department; all transportation, in fact all

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errands, is individually motivated and (literally) driven. Government has been totally discredited; taxes are kept to a minimum, and everyone is on his or her own. All forms of congregation are willed, nothing is spontaneous, and everything is "planned" (but not by others). All that we have known as the City has been carefully edited out. Here, NIMBY ("not in my back yard", a type of refined vigilante stance probably with its intellectual roots in the Ku Klux Klan) motivates the only planned citizen action, which is always driven by fear and against change. "Planning" has become reactive and defensive, rather than seen as serving the public interest by defending the citizenry from its worst self-indulgencies. In past writings, I have defined this state of affairs as After the City, suggesting the City's death – the undramatic end of communal living – and, by definition, the end of *Kultur*.

The Gastropolis

Walking around the streets of Berkeley – the central hub of public education in the most populated state in the union – I notice that the car of choice is the Toyota Prius, the ingenious hybrid car motoring partly on its own friction. This is an obvious choice in this City of Demonstrations (often in the form of bumper stickers), where you flaunt your aversion to the current administration and to the body-builder state governor, but more by habit because the real reason to live here is not to study or to be political, but to eat.

Aside from the well-known revolution in the mid-60s, three lesser but much more resilient (and lucrative) revolutions have taken place here: coffee, food, and wine. Each has its own heroes and heroines: Peet, Alice Waters, and Kermit Lynch. Today's proliferation of coffee houses, food venues, and wine outlets has expanded at such an astonishing rate that Berkeley as a City of Roman Indulgencies lies waiting on the horizon. Yet the intimations are not entirely Roman, since obesity and debauchery are not apparent. In fact, the opposite is true. We have here a peculiar mixture of Athens (the City of the Mind), Sparta (the City of Athletes), and Rome (The City of Decadence). If we add to this all other forms of culinary outliers, such as the indulgence in aromatherapy, whole body massage, and various forms of hallucinogens – all performed under strict organic regulations – we have a City of Communal Self-fulfillment (perhaps never seen before in the history of human congregation). Strangely and ominously built right on the San Andreas Fault, a major earthquake fissure undermining all hopes for eternal bliss, Berkeley will reach a new definition of the *body politic*.

Welfare City

In Stockholm, *Tunnelbanan* – the subway – has demonstrably replaced the freeway network of the City of One; here every man, woman, and child is equal in the flickering lights of the netherworld. Sixty-five percent of the population works in the public sector, paying roughly the same percentage in tax. Curiously, burnout – various forms of exhaustion from work and family demands – is an acknowledged disease here, on par with broken bones and influenza. Yet a thriving industrial culture manages to keep Sweden on a technological edge, compensating in part, and for the moment, for the public indulgences. Many major companies, such as Ericsson, Volvo, Scania, Atlas Copco, and Asea (now Asea Boveri), all formed some hundred years ago, are still productive (with added giants such as Ikea, Hennes & Mauritz and Tetra Pak), although many have been sold to global organizations. Astonishingly beautiful Stockholm with its public amenities, built on many islands and so known as the Venice of the North, has (as do many European nations) an immigration problem, yet to be dealt with in any decisive way.

The Ballardesque projection of this city is twofold. First there is a vibrant mixed culture of immigrants thriving on an entirely black-market economy in formerly defunct satellite cities with newfangled names like Farsta, Tensta, Hjulsta, and Vällingby. Here, anything goes. Police (unable to communicate in the new patois of Turk-Svenska) sit mesmerized, hanging onto their coffee cups in their idling patrol cars; unlicensed dentists and doctors have their services exchanged for Baltic carpentry and Syrian transportation services. Bazaars of black market foods, drinks, and medicine have displaced the old social services system. Alcohol smuggling is rampant, beating the prices of the state liquor stores. New community politics imported from Zagreb and Isfahan have replaced the turgid social-democratic party machine. Snow soccer played with black balls has replaced ice hockey.

Second there is the core society, a large minority of which lives half the year in the Canary Islands or in Thailand. The remaining population (ethnic Swedes and third-generation emigrants) runs the underworked bureaucracies (Dilbert, Scott Adams's cartoon engineer, would feel right at home, "thriving on vague objectives"), but these people also have a part-time existence, since half their time is spent in understaffed convalescent hospitals. The most successful ones are run as satellites in Palma de Mallorca and Casablanca.

In a coda, an absent semi-oligarchy (probably residents of Ballard's hometown, London, close to "the tarmacs of Heathrow") runs, again rather vaguely, the state economy. A condition of absurdity has arrived in which everyday economic activity, the interactions *not* included in official statistics, is

run, Lagos-style, by real people on real streets in a real city, while the official economy – whose electronic signatures race across the global ticker tapes for everyone to see – is run by a virtual cadre of tax evaders. “Money laundering” à la Suedoise, now ranging from “handwashing” in the ancient community creek to major “industrial laundry” on a global scale, is on par with the collective loads conducted by all the hotel chains of the world. The ghetto has reached its logical conclusion – the only thing shared in common is geography.

Supersuburb

As we shall see, for me, Houston is much less open for idle speculation than the other cities I have visited, because it has been in my professional focus for an extended decade and has resulted in two books. But what if a large portion of the city were flooded like New Orleans? Would it be rebuilt? Who would resurrect the oil and gas capital of the world – the very symbol of our carbon dependency – particularly if, in the meantime, we had invented a panoply of energy sources so varied that oil is now only one in an arsenal of sources? Such a resurrection is not very likely! Especially since Houston has none of the cultural appeal of New Orleans. Yet it may still happen for other reason, such as the simple habit of occupation and sense of ownership.

The scenario following upon a 500-year hurricane with major destruction, particularly damaging to the very symbols of urbanity – the skyscrapers of downtown, would unfold as a wide-scale abandonment of lifestyle and property (a return to the days of homesteading) as follows:

The nephew of Tom DeLay – the much maligned and dishonored former exterminator turned politician and the father of redistricting – gets backing from the rapidly organizing monied elite of the city to “redistrict” the entire city, bulldozing the wards formerly occupied by the permanently poor, and to create a “blanket deed restriction” by buying up all abandoned land while creating an archipelago of gated communities. The system of city council and mayor is immediately abandoned and replaced by county supervisors under the chairmanship of a county judge totally motivated by *accessibility* to the new marketplace. The result is an entirely sequestered suburban landscape with willed communities ranging from penny stock investors to golf fanatics. A Robert Moses-type highway mogul (maybe disguised as the county judge) orchestrates all development, allowing the machinery of land ownership (real estate interests) to motivate his or her “plans.” Texas, now entirely incorporated by a new political party called simply the Suburban Party, forms a giant super suburb that refuses to pay federal tax. The state itself is jettisoned in favor of Texas as a State of Mind.

Houston before the catastrophe has many futures, all of them unknowable. But it does have an accumulation of reality peppered with the catastrophic factor providing us with a veritable suburban theater. The spectacle performed is specific to Houston but general to a school of suburban cities stretching from east to west, ending in Los Angeles. All of them host an arsenal of catastrophic factors waiting to occupy center stage. The suburban dream has its own nightmare that we have diligently avoided facing. Now is the time.

The 14,000-mile latitudinal loop on which these scenarios are strung is one of many purposeful paths that Westernized travelers take – all more or less in the service of capital. Other well-worn paths take illegal workers back and forth from Latin America to serve in the North American economy; others travel the African circuits fanning out over Europe. All of these more or less clandestine longitudinal routes use alternative means of transportation, traversing an emerging landscape that in terms of reality exceeds our wildest imaginings. Yet, as has been shown even along the high road from Stockholm to San Francisco, a new global urbanity is leaving its mark, suggesting that first- and third-world nomenclature is inadequate in describing an earth that has itself become a giant, sloppy organism, palpitating in or out of tune with the obscure rhythms of a world economy – a city of sorts.

As far as scenarios for this organism's future go, many can be drawn. The ones explored above are tightly bound to what I have seen; in that sense none of them is science fiction. To be sure, the future will play host to many deformations of this giant global city, some more radically different than others, but in light of current conditions, all of the futures projected here are quite possible. And if the historical realities or genetics of the organism have any bearing on the future, some of the scenarios are even probable. That said, I must add that history also makes the same scenarios highly improbable because of the aforementioned catastrophic function that is deeply embedded in all realities – future ones will see to that. Thus, we can assume that all these speculations are just idle imaginings, with no more bearing on the future than their projective charm.

Thus we can be assured of that the futures of suburban cities will be “interesting” (and, if creative, “beautiful” too) because they have more or less inadvertently prepared for their own spectacles. When we turn to Houston as our case in point we should not be blinded by its specificity. The underlying catastrophic equation is assured by the very infrastructure that all suburban cities share and we should not underestimate its migratory power.

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