

Sugar Land: no inhabitable space without technology

Wouter Veldhuis

In Sugar Land, southwest Houston, there are two completely different housing enclaves. The first is called Venetian Estates. It is aptly named; the central water feature around which the homes are arranged has exactly the same cloudy azure hue as the Venetian lagoon. To achieve this quality of water, a closed water system was created. A simple pump network with coloured dye makes the residents feel like they live in the lagoon of Venice. In ecological terms, the water is dead, but it has greatly increased residential satisfaction. The nearby enclave of Sugar Lakes is on the tail end of a bayou that has been canalised. The water is a muddy brown, visually completely unappealing. However, this water still has some ecological value. The alligators still swim freely. The consequence of this much room for nature is that the people living around it do not have the freedom to enjoy it. High fences along the banks separate the yards from the water. The idea that there are alligators swimming in the water may seem nice, but no one wants one in their back yard!

The tension between nature and culture is palpable in Sugar Land and is literally expressed in the lecture by Lars Lerup. Toxic ecology takes its place in a long line of polemics and manifestos on the fragile balance between city, nature and inhabitants. In this lecture, Mr. Lerup himself seems to want to move beyond his book, *After the City*.¹⁵ In this volume, the suburbs of Houston could still count on the author's appalled admiration. There were sufficient openings and opportunities with regards to develop collective values like public access and sustainability within the mechanism of the suburban metropolis. The undertone in the Toxic ecology lecture is much less optimistic. Because I see the lecture as one small part of an ongoing quest, I have taken the liberty of formulating several critical comments that may fine-tune Mr. Lerup's arguments.

¹⁵ Lars Lerup, (2000), *After the City*, Cambridge, MIT Press

To start with, it is very much in doubt whether the suburban metropolis is as omnipresent as Mr. Lerup suggests. Considering the matter from a non-American perspective, I think that suburban metropolises are a typical American phenomenon of the twentieth century. Many other city types are currently in development world-wide that may become more important in the future than the prototype of Houston. Besides the incredible urban explosions in China and Africa, alternatives are also being developed closer to home. In Europe, the compact city seems to be gaining ground again. Paris is still experiencing explosive growth, and the constantly growing Stockholm can be considered one of the most successful metropolises in the world. Even the suburban metropolises in the Randstad urban conglomeration and the Ruhr Valley do not even remotely resemble Houston and are moving towards a more sustainable balance between nature and culture. Even the United States has alternatives available. Los Angeles is a clear example of a suburban metropolis becoming increasingly complex and compact over time, gradually displaying all the signs of a compact city. In addition, an unusually slight form of city is currently developing, far past the suburbs. The Western European countryside is currently being colonised largely by well-educated urban refugees seeing a more harmonious place to live in a natural setting. The ultra-light city is expanding rapidly, supported by the network of high-speed trains and regional airports. Landscapes in danger of disappearing are being repopulated by urban residents and protected against decline or industrialisation.¹⁶

Progress always provokes resistance. The prevailing opinion is that man is destructive and that Nature in its innocence is the first to pay the price. That is also the undertone in Mr. Lerup's argument. He states that culture (technology) and nature (ecology) are opposing forces that have thus far excluded each other. At the end of his speech, Mr. Lerup argues on behalf of a

¹⁶ Forum 2003, (2003), Euroscapes, Amsterdam, Must publishers

symbiosis between the two concepts, thus opening perspectives for a better future. However, I wonder whether this link is actually a new association. After a long stay in Houston, the English architect and writer Paul Shephard came to the conclusion that humanity is an “army of occupation” cultivating the world.¹⁷ That is why the wolf had to be wiped out and forests were chopped down. We now see this as a completely “screwed-up” world. However, Mr. Shephard shows us that Planet Titanic is in reality a construction that has become more beautiful than ever before. We reshape the world to our own specifications because we want to improve it. Technology is in essence our nature. The only thing we need to learn is how to live in harmony with this technological nature. Isn't life much better now that we have air conditioning, TV remotes, power steering and cruise control? The changed world that we brought into existence is an amazing and powerful phenomenon, made by us on our own behalf.

I close with a final comment on the rhetoric in Mr. Lerup's lecture. There is no denying the fact that the modern metropolises often develop on the very edge of what is possible. The Randstad has in fact been built largely under sea level; Naples continues to grow around Vesuvius; Los Angeles is on the verge of being crushed between two continental plates. However, it would be taking it too far to see this as a consequence of the suburban concept of urbanisation. Hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, droughts, meteorite strikes and other natural disasters have always plagued the world and are absolutely not about to stop simply because we eliminate suburbs. The more people there are on the earth, the more victims there will be of any natural disaster. So far, human civilisation has succeeded in reducing the risks and ameliorating the consequences. In the past centuries of urban civilisation, the human capacity to combine technology and ecology has only grown. I have every confidence in the city of the future.

17 Paul Shephard, (2003), *Artificial Love*, Cambridge, MIT Press