

MISSING URBAN TURNING POINTS

INTRODUCTION

This article proposes a discussion on specific kinds of positive urban transformation, both physical and socio-economic, much more focused on the moment decisions are taken by their administration than necessarily the innovative aspects of their action when implementing programs and projects. Contemporary urban policies may be characterized by huge efforts to find new ways to make cities more competitive, to make their inhabitants' life better and to reduce pressure on environmental resources. At the same time national and international institutions have driven financial and technical support to replicate what is considered successful initiatives, according to the belief that much has to be learned from others' success. Both efforts to innovate planning, intervention and management as well as efforts to multiply good results seem in fact the main characteristic of our contemporary urban theory and urban management. Agenda Habitat II and Agenda 21, if considered a result of global consortium of ideas and an international consortium for the desirable city, may be taken as important documents that reinforce the value of replicating ideas, knowing each other's initiatives, learning from other's experience.

Existing national and international mechanisms of information processing and exchange, and of related technical assistance, should be strengthened to ensure effective and equitable availability of information generated at the local, provincial, national and international levels, subject to national sovereignty and relevant intellectual property rights. (UNO, 1992, Agenda 21, Chapter 40, Article 40.1).

The dissemination of experiences that contribute to facilitating access to adequate housing for all and the development of sustainable human settlements is helpful in the formulation of public policies on human settlements development. National Governments, in partnership with social actors, should: a) Promote the selection of urban management practices that stand out because of their positive impact on improving habitat, ...; b) Set up structures for the selection of best practices,...; (c) Promote the dissemination of best practices, selected locally, nationally, regionally and internationally, in an integrated manner. (UNO, 1996, Agenda Habitat II, Chapter 192)

Discussion brought by this article does not intend to minimize the importance those efforts of replicability generally deserve. It simply reiterates the importance of the moment efforts are thought, planned and implemented. The right moment would so be considered as an ultimate factor for success in the case of urban positive transformations. Moment here is understood as the conjunction of people, their interests, their vision, their past experiences and the resources made available for them: all resulting in a gathered attitude in a precise moment. Although the intention here is to state the importance of the moment factor, we also avoid adopting the ease *Carpe Diem* formula as originally proposed by Horace: a simplistic although pragmatic way of compulsorily setting aside distant hopes, afraid of the fact that time runs away from us.

Dum loquimur, fugerit invida. Aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero. / While we're talking, grudging time will already have fled: seize the day, trusting as little as possible in tomorrow (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, Horace, in Ode 1.11, 1st Century BC).

Although the temptation of easily defend the immediate action, what is in fact not always right and possible, it is necessary to notice that when an opportunity is not taken, when the moment is not properly seized, there is a chance that other factors, not clearly determined or understood, impose intricate interests. Despite long defended action to cope with long known urban contemporary problems, as recurrently defended by recognized reference International Charts and common sense, desires, unfortunately, cannot simply be taken for reality. Discussion presented here should more correctly be connected with the idea that successful urban actions result from people, a precise moment, the opportunities they are offered and above all a hard-to-elaborate context : a combination of factors that goes beyond self-determination, entrepreneurship, innovation and technical accuracy of an idea.

Avoiding pessimistic approaches that could riskily justify non-action at all, this article is based on the assumption that fruitful moments, if they tend not to repeat themselves in the same place, are otherwise copious in the urban history. We believe that opportunist determination to seize such moments and to understand subtle factors that involve them are as important as the development of a proposal itself. Even humbly accepting the importance of factors mentioned above the authors do not discard the need of acute analysis to determine opportunities which are not always clearly presented to the different stake holders in the city.

By opportunities we understand those positive moments offered to some cities along their histories, expected or unexpected, clearly visualized or blurred by a myriad of every day's demands. In order to illustrate these ideas this article discusses experiences that can illustrate the importance of the moment the action is taken, the difficulty to understand hidden phenomena and the disappointment with factors long desired.

The idea discussed here traces possible links between 1. New land use patterns to potentialise local resources; 2. Urban marketing strategies as a way to improve regional and global competitiveness; and 3. Technologies available to implement desired changes. Experiences selected are those concerning projects and their implementation in the cities of Curitiba, Brazil; Montreal, Canada, and N'Dalatando, Angola. Curitiba and Montreal were selected due to their accomplishment long recognized and studied. N'Dalatando was selected due to the current opportunities that seem to be offered to the city. In the first two cases, a search for understanding what helped them in fulfilling good results in their efforts. In the third case, a desire to not miss a rare opportunity.

The apparently discrepancy between these three cities is justified by important possibilities they were offered in their search for transforming their economic, social and urban assets towards not only a better standard of living but also towards a novelty that, as in the case of Curitiba and Montreal, have been insistently, successfully or unsuccessfully, partly or integrally, reproduced in other cities. The ability to recognize, to deal with and to immediately take opportunities are the most valued characteristic in these three projects. In fact, we rely on the assumption that opportunities tend not to repeat twice in a one generation urban period. Besides, the long time required to cities adapt themselves to new forms of architecture and urban structures - just to mention two hard-to-change aspects of urban settlements - explain *duration* of decisions taken long ago in terms of the way city is built, used and destroyed. Thus, not only opportunities may not repeat twice but their implementation may demand years to be transformed in concrete implemented ideas. Regretful mistakes, inability to take the right decision at the right time,

comfortable reproduction of well-known formulae, lack of desire to distinguish itself out of a competitive world or a degradation scenario constitute missed opportunities to establish turning points in the history of a city.

Seizing opportunities as well as understanding how they are offered, when they are made concrete, where they are likely to be found and to whom they are in fact presented, are questions long searched. If history is really a repetition of golden ages, looking back to the past would certainly help to clarify this doubt. If history explains a phenomenon but lacks the ability to formulate new solutions, doubt remains.

What makes London different from Ipswich (Suffolk), or New York different from Ipswich (Massachusetts)? Why do cities have brief golden ages, but then languish? Why are Athens or Florence or Vienna no longer creative powerhouses? Why have Manchester and Glasgow and Berlin, once workshops of the world, given way to Guangzhou and Shanghai? Why do some few cities—London, New York—seem to retain, or regain, their power? (Peter Hall, 2007)

What intrigues the authors of this article is the fact that golden ages, here considered as the moments opportunities are presented and eventually seized, otherwise their causes, can be perfectly determined. Peter Hall, 1998, again, recognizes some of these moments: Manchester in 1780, Glasgow in 1850, Detroit in 1910, Silicon Valley in 1960. Case studies discussed here can also be characterized by both an offered-and-possibly-seized opportunity and a precise moment in their histories. As a matter of fact, such moments, defined by a couple of years or even decades, are clearly recognized when taken as a subject of history. When these moments are prospective constructions or desired transformations to take place somewhere in the future, their confirmation becomes risky, making it difficult to recognize the combination of factors that are decisive for the success.

CASE STUDIES

The description of the three urban examples intends to contribute to the updating of the importance of changes in the history of some cities as moments able to divide that very same history into two different periods: before and after the implementation of innovative and feasible ideas. These moments, able to provoke sudden changes in some specific urban experiences, differentiate themselves from the mere act of properly maintaining the city or accumulatively and slowly improving the level of satisfaction of their entire populations.

Democracy practices, community participatory process, globalized exchange of expertise made easier, reduction of demographic and migration rate in developing countries, availability of information and higher technical capacity of people responsible for local administrations may constitute good factors currently worldwide observed but not necessarily indicating a better urban world. Otherwise, the apprehension in a balanced equation of this list by a selected group of cities around the world may offer a clue of their success: a series of non-missed opportunities, a series of intelligent trade-offs that were able to lose something but also getting something in return, fully comprehending the best and the worst of the same moment. The belief in a new and better urban world, although restricted to some cities, is thus justified: conditions to positively transform our cities were concretely offered but conditions to apprehend them still remains to be understood.

Urban reality, mostly concerning poor cities of poor countries, confirms that most of the conditions long desired have not necessarily transformed our cities. Ironically, democratic practices, community participation, exchange of expertise and demographic rate reduction are not enough any more to make our cities better: if these factors are still important, they are insufficient to provoke new and decisive changes. Either we were wrong in the search of the assets listed above, what is still to be discussed, or this search was prepared in a different world from that the results are to be used. Important changes for the best around the world were in fact exceptions. In case this assumption is confirmed positive, world urban scenario may be summarized as a unique moment of having at its disposal long desired but not fully and appropriately understood and used tools. Missed opportunities or wrong construction of desired tools to transform realities may both characterize our contemporary urban world.

Another assumption observed here is that there are, side by side, silent successes in terms of better urban settlements and visible disasters to which we are not prepared to cope with. Maybe, the consideration of a global and generalized crisis with some very good and innovative examples of positive transformation would be an appropriate way of seeing our contemporary cities.

Despite the importance of some urban initiatives that fulfilled basic urban demands such as shelter, water, health, education, among others, or that simply provided urban amenities as public spaces and incentives to communal life, we still miss the confirmation of generalized cases characterized by the ability to provoke turning points in most of the cities' histories. Few cities in rare moments were able not only to make their inhabitants everyday life better, repeating long desired approaches but also to present innovative solutions that clearly distinguish past from future. Another group of cities were offered the opportunity to combine these two qualities. This group was smart enough not to miss the chance of precise moments – sometimes daring to adopt untested solutions – and being traditional enough to establish a continuous action to fulfill their most common inhabitants' needs and desires.

Curitiba, Montreal and N'Dalatando provide us with moments in their history that could not only reinforce the idea that an optimistic understanding of the urban world is plausible but also that opportunities for creating impressive and for the best turning points are rare and not to be missed. These three examples also reiterate the idea that most of our current urban proposals satellite around ideas of 1. Market strategy (reinforcing competitiveness), 2. Urban marketing (reinforcing self-esteem and, again, competitiveness), 3. Information technology (reinforcing the importance of a world integrated economy) and, 4. Fulfillment of basic urban needs (reminding us that much has still to be done in terms of a better urban world).

CITY OF CURITIBA: UPDATING ITSELF FOR NEW CHALLENGES

Curitiba is a city in the south of Brazil with 1.8 million inhabitants, constituting a metropolitan region of 2.5 million (IBGE, 2006). Its recent urban history can be synthesized in two main periods: before and after a series of interventions started in the 70's with the considerable desire to implement what a Master Plan had previously proposed. It constitutes an exception in a scenario where idea and action, planning and implementation do not always mutually respect each other. In fact, recurrent analysis on the City of Curitiba to investigate the reasons for its success considers the fact of the local power sticking on clear land use law for any future public or private intervention a key element there. A summary of this history could be presented as a fast growing city with ordinary urban problems for that time (late 60's) developed a guideline for its future and decided to implement it. It resulted in urban interventions that would later be discussed and replicated by many cities around the world. Ideas based on the respect to what physical planning proposed were transformed in 1. Determination of new areas to be

developed, 2. Designation of an industrial sector thought to house heavy industries, 3. Pedestrianized axis in downtown district, 4. Exclusive lanes for buses, 5. Hierarchy of the demographic density according to the road system and public transportation, and 6. A series of architectural interventions, mostly for cultural purposes that were able to constitute icons attesting that something new was really happening.

Such series of actions can be characterized by a belief that land regulation (a new land use law was passed), basic urban infrastructures (mainly those concerning public transportation) and a new governmental image (architectural icons were explicitly offered as a signal that things were being made). If the right moment is an asset to be really valued, it is important to notice that all these actions took place in the seventies corresponding to what most of that time urban theories proposed: governmental approach was so ahead of most of their partners in other Brazilian cities. The pragmatic governmental adherence to ideas that believed in the ability of the local power to make a difference outstood distinguished the city national and worldwide for more than 20 years. Despite the fact that local government had no official marketing strategy, reality soon offered important material to help Curitiba in building a positive and unique image of itself: a forgotten city in a developing country that was able to (partly) cope with rapid urbanization, increasing poverty, decaying downtown district, circulation problems and a meagre productive sector. The implementation of an innovative plan (approved in 1965) was in fact the non-missed opportunity offered to the city; it constituted a turning point in its history, a real urban inflexion point. No doubt that much room is still left for discussions, mostly those concerning the sustainability of such interventions, their full appropriation by low-income classes, the use of the success as an alibi for a specific political group to long stay in power, and the use of public money in marketing the city.

Curitiba's fine accomplishments in the areas of urban design and planning, the analysis of the politics of development in Curitiba provides some evidence that too little and low-quality participation is starting to delegitimize the planning process. Indeed, in current local governance practices, the interaction between governmental leaders and citizen groups has not yet amounted to a creative, respectful, and productive dialogue. ... It is expected that Curitiba proves itself again as an intentional city when addressing these challenges and can then continue offering guidance and inspiration to many cities around the globe grappling with similar issues. (Clara Irázabal, 2005)

Currently, despite the fact of not having a formal marketing plan, the city is repeatedly connected worldwide as an urban experience as well as a city marketing experiment. A simple search in the internet using the key words "name of the city" + "city marketing" confirms the singularity of Curitiba if compared with some other main State Brazilian capitals and with some Latin American national capitals. Cities in Brazil were selected due to: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are the two largest cities in the country and nationally and internationally known. Brasília is the country capital and has been a recurrent urban theme since its foundation in the sixties according to Lucio Costa's and Oscar Niemeyer's ideas. Salvador is one of the main national and international tourist destinations in the country and has long invested in the construction of an urban image. Porto Alegre is a Southern state capital in Brazil similar to Curitiba in size and in socioeconomic indicators. Buenos Aires, Santiago do Chili and Bogotá are among the most dynamic cities in the continent.

Curitiba, Brazil: comparative outstanding position with other cities in Brazil and Latin America

City	Number of appearances in	
	www.google.com	www.yahoo.com
Curitiba	336	113
Sao Paulo	588	154
Rio de Janeiro	622	348
Brasilia	254	87
Salvador	174	48
Porto Alegre	410	68
Buenos Aires	585	418
Santiago	148	148
Bogotá	251	294

Source: www.google.com and www.yahoo.com. Access: Feb., 2007. Note: in the case of the City of Salvador search was refined using the word Bahia, the State this city is capital in order not to eliminate entries of other cities under the same name. The same approach was adopted in the case of Santiago, adding the word Chile to refine the search in both browsers.

Taking into consideration the size and importance of other cities presented in the table above, Curitiba is certainly a distinguished city in terms of “city marketing” and “urban intervention”. In fact, it shoulders with important national capitals and, what is really important, figures for Curitiba tend to be much more connected to the city itself (planning and interventions made by local government) than to general events. Thus, figures for Sao Paulo, for example, refer much more to its economic activity than to the action taken by its municipal power. The same can be said for Brasilia in terms of political facts, considering it houses the judicial, executive and legislative national powers.

In an attempt to maintain such distinguished position the city of Curitiba was forced to renovate actions and their priorities. This natural imposition to an administration that presented itself as committed to a better urban life through innovative ideas tried to immediately respond to new demands. Thus, in the following decades, the 90s and years 2000, the importance given to public transportation soon gave room for environmental concerns and social and participatory approaches. This metamorphosis confirmed the ability to adapt itself to new demands and to new rationales such as those represented by environmental and social NGOs and minority groups, both local and international. Most of all, this metamorphosis confirmed the ability to answer to new demands as soon as they are created, reinforcing the importance of acting at the right moment, somewhat pioneering in terms urban management. Behind this ability, which has been confirmed in concrete actions, local administration and political group in power adopted, not officially in a specific document, urban marketing procedures as a tool to invite local community to positively embark on governmental proposals. Needless to say it helped to perpetuate a group in power based on the idea that this very same group is the only one who can represent the ideal city of Curitiba. Needless to say, too, that, as seen above, this marketing was profoundly criticized not only in terms of specific approaches taken by the City of Curitiba, but also and frequently in terms of the essence of branding a city as product for sale.

Vainer (2000) criticizes this approach for being unaccepted inspired by corporate planning and based on the assumption that cities may be subject to the very same injunctions companies are: competing for new and “smart” capital, adopting managerial techniques, developing tourism and most of all constituting a magnet for qualified workforce. For authors like Vainer these are propositions generally known under the name of Strategic Planning, in which city marketing plays a decisive role, and that can hardly be committed with the most basic and emergency needs of the majority.

If literature did not “bless” Curitiba’s attachment to marketing - a fact that can be much more detected in domestic research than abroad - the city somewhat pioneered in Brazil for developing a higher self-esteem among its population and for upgrading local inhabitants’ ability to demand better public services. Considerations like this are thus based on the belief that marketing could also constitute a positive administrative tool.

Cities, like products, tend to develop reputations over time. Unfortunately, not all cities can have a positive image associated with them. Many cities develop a host of problems and consequently become “branded” as places where no one wants to live or where no business wants to locate. They become trapped in a downward spiral that is extremely difficult to avoid. ... Cities may attempt to improve themselves physically—infrastructure may be improved and dilapidated buildings torn down. Planning projects and programs may be established to remedy various issues within the city. But these are not significant enough efforts for cities that have developed extremely negative images. Marketing cities in conjunction with these other efforts can help connect people with the positive information the city wants to convey about itself. (Bonanno, 1995)

The recent history of Curitiba - full of success, exacerbated enthusiasm, political interests, false or confirmed economic and social mismanagement, inconsistent or coherent criticism - reveals a corollary of action that in fact changed the face of the city and the way it is seen abroad. The two citations below, from reports on climate change and urban solutions to it may, once more, announce a desired metamorphosis of Curitiba, now going deeper in its environmental experiences. Skepticism makes us to doubt if it really represents the ability of the city in responding to such difficult demand or if it simply represents a belief built on past success.

Curitiba ... has a stubborn habit of caring for the urban environment, a quality that has turned this one-time colonial outpost into one of the most livable places in the developing world. While most big cities are symphonies in gray, Curitiba is arbored and tidy, with 54 square meters of greenery per resident....” (Newsweek Magazine, 2007, Special Report: living with climate change).

The solution to this is clear: good public transport. In some places that is recognised. In southern Brazil, Curitiba, the capital of Paraná state, has been trying to keep its transport system abreast of an expanding city’s needs since the 1940s, when the town got its first urban plan. In the 1970s a busy commercial street was pedestrianized—a first for Brazil—and elsewhere buses and local traffic were made to run down the centre of broad roads while faster traffic whizzed one way down either side. In the 1980s the city went increasingly green, creating parks, extending the transport system and bringing in multi-carriage buses. The transport authority collected the fares and paid the bus operator. Curitiba’s buses achieved average speeds above 20kph, carrying 12,000 passengers at peak hours. Rail transport generally does better, but the buses were popular and cheap (though they have recently been losing market share). Other Brazilian cities have copied Curitiba, but without much success. (The Economist Magazine, 2007, Special Report on Cities)

For the interest of this discussion, it is important to discuss how the city of Curitiba was able to detect an opportunity, implement a plan and, what seems impressive if it is really true, how it produced a metamorphosis of updated priorities: from a technical proposal of zoning, to a mass transportation system, an environmentally concerned place, and finally to a participatory regulated city. Much room is left to discuss the fulfillment of each of these moments and also the ability of this city to keep on metamorphosing itself and be able to seize following opportunities in a foreseeable future. Efforts have been made to criticize the city, to apologetically applaud it and to insistently copy its projects. However, not so many efforts have been observed to discuss the conditions that made all this happen.

N'DALATANDO: OPPORTUNITIES TO BE SEIZED

N'Dalatando is a city 250 km west of Luanda, Angola's capital, a 27-year-long suffering country with internal ideological war. Such war destroyed not only national infrastructures but also imposed 3 decades of decay, forced migration, generalized deterioration, no governmental control and lack of institutional frameworks to deal with new urban demands.

Total population of this city is still to be determined, but generally, different secondary data and empirical analysis agree on around 100 thousand inhabitants. From a Portuguese colonial village, in the 50's, known as Salazar City, and an urban landscape dotted with outstanding modernist buildings, the city became a settlement with no predefined urban rules, no public infrastructure and no urban references after the war. The city can be synthesized as a rugged terrain covered with 25 sqm adobe house units. If seem from this single perspective, N'Dalatando is just another African city with high demographic rate, a migration magnet after recent economic, political and ethnical changes and suffering from the consequences of a devastated war. What makes the city of N' Dalatando special, as many others in Angola, may be the opportunities it has been offered along the last couple of years.

Angola, which shared the stage with the world's most powerful oil-producing nations at its first OPEC meeting here last week, is an unlikely candidate to be the darling of the global oil industry. An underdeveloped, war-scarred country that has foundered for decades under corrupt leadership, Angola is one of the poorest lands on earth. But ask any energy executive these days and another picture emerges: a place of immense riches, solicitous of foreign investors and among the three fastest-growing oil exporters in the world today. In the capital, Luanda, hotel rooms cost more than \$200 a night and are booked two months in advance by the oil companies. (Jad, 2007)

After the civil war, peace potentialized not only business and international investments in Angola but also made increasing pressure on urban land evident. Despite meagre results to cope with this problem, it is important to mention that the national government adopted a series of actions: in 2003 the Angolan government established a new Ministry of Urban Development and Environment; in 2005, the National Reconstruction Office was created. In 2004 a series of Land Laws was enacted, but they still did not fully respond to the problem of forced evictions and security of tenure. In 2006, the Angolan government publicly acknowledged the right of those forcibly evicted to be compensated. Thus, the New Land Law was approved, trying to correct mistakes committed by previous legislations, such as the privatization process taken place in the seventies.

Desire of national reconstruction, availability of financial resources and a set of new legislation seem to constitute the perfect recipe for urban transformations. Considering that large areas in N'Dalatando still belong to the provincial or local government, appropriation of this asset, once respecting dwellers' interests, certainly confirms any optimism believing in the possibility to positively change the city.

Another aspect that could justify a scenario of opportunities to the city of N'Dalatando is the construction of a new railroad and the reconstruction of a paved road to Luanda. The finalization of such infrastructure is expected to boost the local and regional economy by making shorter and cheaper the connection with the most populated and most dynamic areas of Angola. Unfortunately, organizing and monitoring the way land is to be occupied along this road still remains to be checked. Chinese financial and technical support is already observed in the construction of the highway and railway to Luanda. Despite the fact that it is not confirmed yet, officials already consider the possibility of having similar support for the construction of housing blocks in the city. In this case, site is not confirmed and so far not connected with a land use or strategic plan. Unfortunately, how to plan future Chinese investments in housing is not yet officially considered a potential vector to establish strategic areas to be, or not to be, occupied. Unfortunately, architectural heritage still lacks a comprehensive plan to potentialize resources and make dotting investments a more general intervention. Fortunately, a strategic plan has been assigned by the government of the Kwanza Norte Province to establish guidelines for new settlements and for the correction of current irregular pattern of urban land use. This plan, assigned by the government of the Kwanza Norte province and developed by a Brazilian Office – Willer Arquitetos Associados – in association with local officials, also suggests emergency action in terms of sanitation and public health as well as the implementation of “reference” physical interventions such as parks and architectural icons to stimulate self-esteem.

Opportunity in this case may so be characterized by investments with very high level of social and environmental risks but also with unique chances to transform reality. This precise situation may also be characterized by the existence of a plan to be discussed, officially adopted and implemented.

It is tempting to affirm that this Angolan city is being faced to a unique opportunity to build a new urban reality. Otherwise, it would be naïf not to consider other factors in this complicated game of changing current and still disastrous situation. In a first sight some very evident factors come to mind: minority political interests to keep the power attained since the end of the war, elite's economic interest that value the market higher than community basic needs, public administrative mismanagement that allow or even strength generalized corruption.

Angola is the second-largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, after Nigeria. Yet its people are by some measures the world's most miserable. These two facts coexist in part because more than \$4 billion in oil receipts have disappeared from Angola's treasury in the last six years, according to the International Monetary Fund. ... The misuse of oil revenues robs Angolans of more than health care and education. The opportunity to steal millions gives the country's leaders a reason never to risk this privilege by democratizing. (The New York Times, 2004)

How to potentialize such momentary and already identified opportunities and minimize erratic and blurred factors that may influence negatively any attempt to transform the city are certainly decisive questions that should be answered. In the case of N'Dalatando, as well as in uncountable similar cities, the challenge, again, is not only the quality of the plan to be adopted

or the desire to transform the reality, or the decision to seize the opportunity. In fact, the determination of dealing with much more undefined factors is the main and first step towards structural changes. All this may even confirm the limitations of urbanism or urban management to transform cities by themselves. In fact, the criticism towards modernist urbanism could be repeated here. The long adopted modernist dream to reshape cities physically to reshape it socially seems fragile once more. Highly criticized aspects of modernism in town planning may now alert for restrict success in N' Dalatando.

[modernist planning is based on a] belief in linear progress, positivist, technocratic, rational planning of social and geographic space; standardized conditions of knowledge and production and a firm faith in the rational ordering of urban space to achieve individual liberty and human welfare (Irving 1993).

Cases like this make clear the submission of urban plans and their implementation to societal phenomena generally partially understood and hard to tackle.

MONTREAL: MULTIMEDIA GIVING LIFE AN OLD INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT

In the early 90's Montreal faced three main challenges in terms of economy, demography, and urban issues. Economically, it had lost to Toronto the prominence as the Canadian financial hub. Demographically, Toronto had surpassed Montreal as Canada's most populous city; and due a combination of cultural and economic factors, the province of Quebec (whose main city is Montreal) was losing skilled young professionals to the province of Ontario and to the United States. Finally, alongside the fact of losing population Montreal was coping with a contemporary urban dilemma: a combination of urban sprawl and desertification of long occupied urban areas.

Some structural changes should be done to recover those economic, demographic and urban trends which could undermine not only the importance of the city of Montreal but also of the entire province of Quebec. The relevance of the city to the province may be confirmed by the fact that 50 percent of the 7.2 million people of Quebec live in the metropolitan area of Montreal, 23 percent of the young population hold university degree (against 15 percent in the province) and 27 percent of the entire population are immigrants (as against 10 percent in the province) and some of the most important Canadian universities and financial centers are located in this city. With 64 percent of its inhabitants having the French as their first language, Montreal is a mix of cosmopolitan values (needed to face the high level competition with other Canadian cities for global market revenues) with provincial traditions (to maintain and, if possible, increase the role of Quebec in the global scene).

Given this scenario, it is not an easy task to detect and to grab the opportunities made available for the city. But, after some attempts to maintain the prominence of the city in the national scenario and with financial and technological shifts down to the South (Ontario and US) which risked isolating the city from the global economic dynamics, one thing was certain: the decisive moment to change had come.

To analyze it we propose to look at a specific intertwined urban project and economic development program implemented in an old industrial area of Montreal's downtown at the second half of the 90's. The region is Faubourg des Récollets and the program is called Multimedia City.

Faubourg des Récollets was built as an industrial district once the industries could profit the direct access to the harbor. However a series of urban infra-structure programs took place a few

years after the implementation of the district: the creation of the Saint Lawrence Seaway in 1959, the construction of the Bonaventure Expressway in 1965, which cut the district in two, and the closing of the Lachine Canal in 1970. These infra-structure works contributed to desertification of the area, once it had lost the access to a main river port and was cut off the city by expressways.

During the last decades of the 20th, even being only a few blocks from the Civic Center and from the historical district crowded by tourists every summer with its bars, museums, restaurants and festivals, and facing important regional roads, many urban programs to rehabilitate the area failed. An example is the failure of the revitalization project proposed by Real Estate Heritage Society of Montreal at the beginning of the 90's.

Despite disappointments government and community still considered the possibility to discontinue degradation of the area. In 1997, another program was launched aiming its urban and economic reinsertion: the Multimedia City. This program is part of a major provincial program called Information Technology Development Centers (CDTI as known in French), whose aim is to develop and consolidate the province as an important hub to the information and technology industry. In an adverse scenario where Quebec was losing its skilled young IT professionals to the US and the English part of Canada, the CDTI program saw a first opportunity in France, where the multimedia industry was not well developed and could represent an open door to the European market (Quebec, 2003).

By linking a provincial social and economic development program with a profound market study, the integration with local universities and an urban rehabilitation project, the Multimedia City had accomplished the key elements of an IT cluster development: innovative technology and of industries clustered in a synergetic way in a diversified social and cultural region. At this moment, in this city, one could detect the necessary characteristics pointed as important by various authors (Tidd, Bessant, Pavitt, 1997; PORTER, 1999) to implement an innovative cluster. No longer than 2 years after the inauguration of this program, Montreal was classified as one of the three most dynamic and innovative multimedia industry in Canada (British Trade International, 1999).

In terms of urban renovation, the purpose was to occupy new buildings constructed in the neighborhood or the rehabilitated ones mainly by local and small companies. Today, 37 percent of the companies have less than 5 employees and only 6 percent have more than 100 employees (Dion, 2001). 46 percent of the companies may be classified as multimedia development and design business companies. 17 percent may be classified as those of software development. 30 percent are complimentary companies. Today, more than 6 thousand people whose revenues are almost 50 percent higher than the city's average work in the Multimedia City. Besides, 800 people out of this total live in the vicinity.

The Government of Quebec expected to recover its direct investment in the area, mainly in real state development or fiscal aides, in 10 years. Optimism is already justified: in only 6 years, 7 out of the 8 new buildings sponsored by the government were already sold for amounts higher than expected (Le Devoir, 2004).

What intrigues in the presentation of this project is the possibility of this opportunity to repeat itself in the history of the city of Montreal or to confirm itself as a unique moment. Probably not. First, because the technological gap between the English and French part of Canada would be deeper – even irreversibly deeper to attract or maintain the brightest young professionals. Second, because the European IT industry would have improved - as in fact did - in the period of 10 years that were necessary for Quebec to enter into this competitive market. The choice for an old downtown area to be the site for such an innovative industry is an example, followed in other countries that the new information technologies infiltrates in the territory and can radically change a place – if the right moment is correctly perceived and grabbed. An example that could

be mentioned is the case of the City of Recife, in the North-East of Brazil, also studied by these authors. In this case, with reduced chances to invest, limited local market to absorb production and a much more social and economic critical situation to impact, may explain different results. Again, quality of the proposal / project does not guarantee desired impacts.

CONCLUSIONS

Discussion preliminarily presented above may indicate that planning models can be replicated, opportunities that could lead to urban inflexions don't. Human, technical and information resources, for long considered absolute necessary assets, can still be considered so, but experience has proved that they are not enough to transform a city and create a turning point in its history. After decades of building institutional capacity, appropriate technical skills and easily obtained information on the area subject of a project - as defended by international financial agencies and reference charts -, the right approach to correctly transform a specific city may cause disillusion. In fact, either these three factors are no more than a step in a long journey towards a better scenario, or they represent meager assets among an intricate and unidentified situation. These are the main conclusions of this article. The hypothesis is that an urban inflexion depends on singular urban moments that change along time and place. Yet it may sound obvious at a first glance, it puts at stake expensive efforts on replicating urban models and best practices as defended by international agencies, if they are not submitted to a more complex analysis of the local situation. This analysis would compulsorily go beyond the traditional limits of a project but also explore not clear societal factors. Further discussion on this idea could bring a certain clarification towards the understanding of such factors. If hypothesis is right, one could add a fourth factor in the list of long desired assets to positively transform cities. The difference from the previous three is that now, we are not familiarized with our own demands.

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