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### **Transmodernism and the City**

By the year 2050, it is projected that over 6 billion people, roughly 66% of the world's population, will live in urban areas (World's Population, 2014). This holds more significance than merely stating the continual growth of the human population. City development, urban planning and design, and individual structures all have an agency that necessarily impacts the lives of every human that lives, works, and exists within a city environment. It is part of the human condition to be fundamentally impacted by the surrounding environment. Therefore, the environments that humans develop for themselves for present and future times will be instrumental in shaping how posterity views the world. Cities, and the future of the designs and practices they incorporate, will be the foundational step in the global movement of a shift into the transmodern age.

In order to show that cities will indeed be the necessary foundation for the coming age of transmodernism, it is first necessary to show the link between the human relational paradigm and the corresponding contemporary environments. As humans have developed from hunter-gatherers, to agricultural farmers, to urban and suburban dwellers (and

all of the many intermediary stages), so too has the general global philosophy constantly evolved.

Though modernism is a philosophy dominant in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it has roots extending all the way back into the agricultural age, in which planned and intentional farming replaced general hunting and gathering. This is important, because it marks the beginnings of the deterministic transition of the human relationship with the environment. Agriculture started man's craving to control his environment, and since that time humanity has only ever worked toward furthering that control. This is the beginning of the transition from a philosophy of animism, in which one finds a spiritual connection to every object and being in their environment, to a philosophy in which one becomes the master of the objects and beings in their environment. This paradigm has held steady since the transition to agriculture, only amplified by the next transition into urbanization.

This is necessary to begin with, although the next stage comes many thousands of years later. It was the first step in the course for humanity to eventually arrive at modernism. Modernism is essentially a philosophy of functionalism, productivity, and efficiency. It promotes advancement and progress through scientific means, not spiritual or religious revelation. City structures designed in the reign of this philosophy give no thought to aesthetic design or appeal; they are strictly functional. Dull factories, mass-produced apartment complexes, and a

lack of cultural spaces such as parks all increased this mentality of functionality as priority.

Dr. Richard Jackson, a pediatrician and the current Professor and former Chair of Environmental Health Sciences at the Fielding School of Public Health at UCLA, has done extensive research on the impact of cities on the health of those living inside (*Designing Healthy Communities*). His research explains the trend between cities that are designed with the functionality of the automobile in mind rather than the pedestrian, and the drastic increase in health problems within these urban communities. The doubling of diabetes in the last fifteen years, the drastic rise in obesity (particularly for youth), and the increase in depression and suicide rates are all seen as stemming from a problem initiated by poor urban layout environments.

Dr. Jackson's documentary, *Designing Healthy Communities*, describes many important points. The first, and most relevant in discussing the agency of the city, is how the current urban design has increased the isolation between people, particularly youth and the elderly. While suburbs are nice escapes from industry-filled cities, they also require a vehicle in order to get anywhere. Youth are more isolated from activities found in the city, and are left with a dependency on vehicles. On the other end of the age spectrum, the elderly become shut-ins when they lose their ability to drive and have no access to public transportation. Isolation from other individuals and from any kind of

activity increases mental illnesses such as depression (suicide is the number 3 cause of death in teenagers in the country), obesity, diabetes, and an overall unhealthy and unhappy lifestyle. Cities are destroying community morale. The most affordable housing in an area is also the furthest commute into the city, promoting social and income gaps within city limits. People are forced by their circumstances to accept the environment established for them, without the ability to do much about it.

This is the environment that we, as humans, have created for ourselves. Or rather, that the technocrats have designed in conjunction with the views of modernism. Efficiency trumps all else and productivity reigns in the design structure. The frustration with this dominant materialistic paradigm encouraged the shift into postmodernism, in which knowledge gained purely on scientific fact and quantifiable progress began to fall under severe scrutiny. Postmodernism is a meditative response to the calculative thinking presented in the modernist paradigm. This is also a direct response to the isolation of the urban environment. Postmodern architecture further shows the scrutiny of basic styles and classical patterns that modernism assumed for their function. Previously, architecture was highly indicative of its cultural origin. Different cultural areas, time periods, and geographic locations had a unique style, easily identifiable. Postmodern architecture, at a glance, seems impossible and random. New structures entered into the

city, and as creatures of design, the cities changed. In the modern era, buildings served a purpose, and were designed solely to execute that purpose. Tall, rectangular skylines were the result. The postmodernist architect, however, responded in direct defiance by spending an immense amount of effort on the aesthetic design of the building. Flowing edges, rather than rough corners, impossible shapes, and excessive outer ornamentation were the product (such as the Experience Music Project building in Seattle). Defiance is the key word of postmodernism, both in the seemingly impossible buildings that were constructed as well as in the criticisms and questioning of the people adhering to the philosophy. There seems to be a pattern of city officials, or those in charge, accepting a philosophy, constructing or modifying a city to that philosophy's standards, and finally the public's unintentional acceptance of the values of that philosophy, simply because it is so dominant in their environment that they are forced to live in a certain manner.

We become subject to the realities we create for ourselves. And the current environment we have made for ourselves is once again undergoing change, which suggests the coming of a new paradigm. Sustainable building and sustainable design has become a forerunner in the new stage in city development. Sustainability is all about placing the quality of life of the community as a priority. Everything is currently built with the notion of the "triple bottom line", a phrase that refers to paying attention to the environmental, social, and economic impacts of the

designs created for our communities. This further reinforces the concept that environments completely affect the way we see the world, each other, and our roles in society. As we transform our cities into a design that incorporates care of the person as well as the productiveness of the individual, we will begin transforming our worldview into that of transmodernism.

Before diving into the argument that sustainable city design will be the foundation for the transmodern age, I will first define “sustainability” as it is understood in the engineering and city design community, and then I will discuss what is meant by the term “transmodernism”. Since sustainable development is all but determined to continue and flourish, transmodernism will soon follow. This will also be in conjunction with those who preach transhumanism. All are connected, and all are interdependent.

Sustainability is about meeting the needs of the current generation without preventing the future generations to meet their needs, through responsible use of resources, a reduction in waste, and the movement toward more renewable sources for construction. Sustainability is future oriented in every way, from conservation efforts to monetary profit. The future is the goal, and is achieved by the way in which we build the present. Further, it requires the integration of occupations from a variety of fields. Dr. Richard Jackson – a leader in the forefront of lobbying for a drastic change in urban design – is a pediatrician by trade. Real estate

agents, sociologists, environmental groups, construction companies, and so many more are all incorporated into the effort toward redesigning cities for a sustainable future (Nguyen, K. 2014).

In order to achieve a sustainable city design, different certification systems have been established, both for the certification of projects and systems as well as infrastructure as a whole. Two such systems are LEED (Leaders in Environmental and Energy Design), and Envision™. These are privately owned companies operating on a national and global scale to certify city infrastructure. The process to achieve LEED certification is intense and expensive, and it is left up to the discretion of the LEED certifier (who is labeled such due to his or her experience in the program – a technocrat) to decide which level of certification the developer receives. Incentives for green building come in tax breaks and bragging rights, as those who attain LEED certification typically have proof framed and centered in the structure. Oftentimes, contractors and engineering firms will build green according to the standards listed in the LEED and Envision™ certification lists, but will not go through the process to actually achieve certification due to the immense effort and money needed.

The values of sustainability and sustainable practice have even penetrated their way into the code of ethics for professional engineers. It is expected of any designer to act with the intentions of the future in

mind, a message that falls hand in hand with the philosophy of transmodernism.

Transmodernism, as it has been developed in the last decade, bears a striking resemblance to the ideas proposed by the sustainable movement in city design. Transmodernism was a term first coined by feminist philosopher Rosa Maria Rodriguez Magda (Ateljevec 2013). The idea of transmodernism is not simply the next linear step in human evolution, succeeding modernism and postmodernism. Transmodernism goes beyond either of its two previous paradigms while simultaneously incorporating values of both. Transmodernism recognizes that meaning must exist, like the modernists, but it is not the meaning found in material production and functionality, something the postmodernists would agree with. In a sense, transmodernism is the full circle of human evolution, in that it brings our species back into the presence of the idea of connectedness, a view prevalent in the times of early humanity. All things are connected, all things hold significance, and all things impact one another. Meaning exists where we create it. This is the transcendence yet incorporation of modernity and postmodernity. Irena Ateljevic, a researcher in the field of transmodernism and tourism with a PhD in Human Geography, describes this paradigm shift into transmodernity as a response to society's demand for a future of hope and transformation (Ateljevec 2013). She describes how this transformation is increasingly in response to a globalized and ever more

technical world, yet with a desire from the public to shift their focus from productivity towards human quality of life. And since human life is, and will continue to be, predominately in urban areas, it is these areas that will be crucial towards designing to meet these needs. Another way of describing transmodernism is the transformation of cities from “cities of doing” into “cities of being” (Buchanan 2013). This phrase ideally showcases the importance of cities as places of more than just business and rapidity, but places in which one can develop as a whole person.

I think it is quite clear how a city, and its design, impact the immediate quality of life of the individual who lives, works, and exists within the environment. I do not think it needs extensive argumentation to claim that the way in which a home is designed, or an office building, or a grocery store, will impact the way in which we exist in those structures. Healthy building promotes healthy living. However, a bigger stretch may be to say that the design of these structures, and the overall pattern which they make up, impacts our entire worldview. It impacts our behavior, how we interact with one another, how we interact with our environment, and consequentially, how we project these immediate relations to a global scale. Peter Buchanan, an African architect and urban designer, discusses the role of a city in the lives of its citizens in his collection of essays titled “The Big Rethink”. One of his first essays begins with the bold statement, “The fundamental purpose of urban design is to provide a framework to guide the development of the citizen”

(Buchanan 2013). Of all things, Buchanan holds the city in which one lives as the framework for guiding the spiritual, professional, intellectual, and overall development of the citizen that resides in it. He claims it is the very *purpose* of urban design to foster such growth, not just a byproduct of functionality as a modernist would see fit.

Another way in which to explain the idea of a city's place in welcoming an era of transmodernism is to compare a transmodern city with a transhumanist citizen. Transhumanism is the point at which man and machine finally meld together, forming a being that behaves at maximum efficiency, yet is also able (at least in theory) to pursue the ultimate ideal of individualism through self modifications and enhancements. A transmodern city promotes the exact same ideals. A transmodern city is both dynamic and globalized, yet also has a distinct character and flare that defines it uniquely. Buchanan neatly, and unintentionally, defines both the necessary components of transmodernism - functionality and meaning - when he advocates for a city that is both economically competitive while still retaining individuality in a globalizing world. He discusses the importance of the roles of culture-enhancing items, such as cuisine and style, claiming that "cities as much as countries compete for these economic essentials, and key assets are a city's quality of life and individuality of character." (Buchanan 2013). The city itself is a network made up of nodes of people and places, but it is also just another node in a global network economy.

This is identical to the transhumanism model, but on a much larger scale.

In an ironic sense, the idea of transhumanism and transmodernism contain elements of a Heideggerian theme of *essence*. Though the philosopher himself refused to even use a typewriter, his opinions on returning to searching for the essence of the environments around us is at the heart of the transmodern, and sustainable, world. There is a significant reason that urban parks are an essential component of every city. We feel connected to nature because we are of the same biological organic chemicals; we connect with things mysterious to us, yet like us. This will be the new city. It has a personality, a character, and a function similar to ours, yet is completely mysterious to us on a broad level.

The ultimate goal, according to Buchanan, is to transform our current “Cities of Doing” into “Cities of Being” (Buchanan 2013). This necessitates transmodernism. Firstly, “Cities of Being” implies having the luxury of time. In the current modern/postmodern paradigm, time is rapid. Life requires movement, business, and progress. Time is of the essence, time is precious, time cannot be wasted, and each moment must be filled with action. In the transmodern view, time is created. Yet in a place in which simply existing is enough to necessitate purpose, simply *being* is just as progressive as *doing*.

This is exactly the concept of making cities into places, as opposed to non-places or spaces. The philosopher Marc Augè discusses the idea of places and spaces, differentiating between the two with calculative and meditative thinking. Spaces, such as public areas, are physically located in space and time, and have a geographic permanence (Augè 2009).

While places may have the same characteristics, they are defined by the immaterial history, stories, and cultures that make up a Heideggerian *essence* to their existence. The hope of the transmodernists is to take such a public and distanced place as a city, and transform it into a cultural place for those that dwell within. It is akin to visiting a public park. A pleasant space for the outsider, yet for one who has grown up on the playground, biked the trails, had birthday parties on the field, gotten engaged in the plaza, or any multitude of things, the park holds a meaning greater than that of its quantifiable parts.

Augè comes to another conclusion, however, in his discussion of place versus space. He refers to what is called “supermodernity”, in which exactly the opposite happens. That is, the city becomes entirely a space, and therefore holds no meaning to anyone outside of the functions it can provide. Supermodernity sees the end of more calculative thinking, and focuses entirely on the success and progress of its parts. It is striving for the impossible, for there is no existing man or machine that operates at 100% efficiency. I do not see this as the future of the city, as the shift toward sustainable living encourages the connection of people

with their environment, rather than distancing themselves emotionally from it. A sense of connectedness and relatedness will not support the idea of supermodernity, but will force the individual to establish a real and meaningful relationship for the area in which they live. The road ahead forks. In one direction is the complete solitude of supermodernity, in which functionality is maximized at the expense of the unquantifiable quality of life. The other road is transmodernity, a system which incorporates sustainability of the soul through sustainable city design. It requires transforming cities from solitary spaces into community places, areas with a rich culture, history, and character while simultaneously efficiently performing their required functions.

Ateljevec talks about how we view transmodernity as a planetary vision, in which we realize that all beings, plants and animals alike, are interconnected, which calls us to a responsibility to protect the earth as a whole and all the communities it supports (Ateljevec 2013). This is quite nearly verbatim the definition of sustainability. The two are so similar in content that the existence of one undoubtedly will bring about the presence of the other. Transmodernity looks at quality of life as a measure of progress, not efficiency, functionality, aesthetics, or finances. Quality of life is the ultimate standard to which everything else is compared. And this again is the essence of the meaning of sustainability.

Sustainability is all about increasing independence in order to maximize community. Being independent from a structural point of view

means creating areas that are self-sustaining. This is geared toward creating a community aspect that champions human physical, emotional, and spiritual health. This is sustainability from an engineering point of view, yet this is in tandem with the movement toward transmodernity, in which the person is championed as having true value and meaning, yet optimization of quality of life is at the core of continual progression. (Designing Healthy Communities 2012).

Transhumanism and sustainability are both nostalgic in the sense that they look back in time toward communities that were so crucially in tune with their surrounding environment. The animistic relationship promoted mutual respect, not dominance, between humans and nature. In the technocratic age, we have the possibility of using mechanic technology in order to help us achieve this connectivity. This is what makes it transmodern.

It has taken us several hundred years to realize that spirituality is an integral component of humanity. Building cities that ignore this has slowly deprived us from values that are so important, yet come at the price of placing relationships over efficiency. Relationships with self, others, nature, and the very buildings in which we live must be prioritized over the mere monetary or time efficiency that we can gain from other means. We need relationships, much more than we need an efficient machine of action. In the physics world, there is no such thing as a 100% efficient machine or system of any type. It is physically

impossible. Why then, do we hold this expectation for humanity? We require so much more than the efficient completion of tasks, the efficient organization and compartmentalization of relationships. We require the integration of enhancement technology with the realization that no amount of machine can ever give us that which we crave most. This is transmodernity. And this, I argue, is brought about most strongly and most apparently in our immediate environment: the city.