MANIFESTO – WHAT MAKES A GOOD CITY?

A Recipe for a Good City. Preamble.

The practice of creating ‘good cities’ is complex because it involves an element of time and the user – both of which are difficult to predict. There are, however, several similarities that I have encountered which contribute to a city being great. At the risk of making generalizations, the ingredients below if positioned correctly together will create a good city. Personally, I feel that great cities create (and are created from) a strong collective identity and sense of place. Within these cities, the public realm extends deep into the fabric that densely defines it. The balance between open squares and narrow streets, parks and hard paving, infrastructure and event, monuments and fabric, and finally, public and private realms, is crucial to the city’s success. Furthermore, the ability of the edges of each realm to dissolve into the next to produce hybrid conditions, I believe, creates a continuous and complex city that promotes social interaction. This idea of social interaction is a reoccurring theme in the document. I firmly believe that if cities can reduce social isolation and promote interaction between people of different social, economic and racial backgrounds that we will be able to progress as a society.

Ingredients.

A Sense of Place. All great cities are tied to an urban artifact of natural form. Some examples being the Thames in London, the Tiber in Rome, Mont Royal in Montréal, and the Island of Manhattan. This was usually done for pragmatic and/or spiritual reasons, but seem to effectively ground the city in the world, and offer a sense of place that extends beyond the city limits. New cities that are established next to highways or train stations inevitably lack this characteristic, and try to artificially insert monuments of identity.

Consistent and Dense Fabric. Any great city will have a complex, dense and consistent fabric. It is in fact the density that forces public interaction, and transforms the street into a public sphere. The consistency is what ties buildings together, and allow them to define spaces beyond their perimeter. Complexity usually comes from time and the user, but requires a base infrastructure to occur.

Monuments. Monuments provide the juxtaposition to the fabric. As urban artifacts, they contribute to giving identity to a city, and impose a collective vision to the residents of the city. Two characteristics of a good monument: 1) They must be public in nature (public institutions or monumental sculptures available to all) 2) Although it is their role to ‘not be fabric’, they must still relate and integrate themselves into the network of fabric. In cases where several monuments are positioned together, they should be arranged to create their own space. In general, monuments should be ‘sprinkled’ throughout the city, to avoid large central zones detached from areas in which people live.

Independence from the Car. Provide infrastructure early in a city’s development to reduce and control car use. This can imply the scale of walkability (usually about 1km to public services) as well as embedding subway lines early in the city’s formation. Inevitably, highways will be built. Therefore, these should be planned early, and if possible, placed underground to not disturb the pedestrian realm above. The parking associated with these vehicles should be located underground, or in parking garages integrated within the fabric. There should be no surface parking.

Public Square. At moments when the infrastructure (main roads and subway stations) meet both monument and fabric, public squares should be built. These should be hard paving, and revolve around a feature (i.e. Like the fountains with steps in Italy) that promotes social interaction. These are usually large (approximately 100 x 100 m with 4-6 storey buildings lining the edge) and contain the character of the city. Other public spaces
should occur in conjunction with the natural artifacts that give a sense of place. These could be linear public parks along a river, or trails and lookout posts on a hillside.

Secondary Square. These are voids or cuts into the fabric. They are not as civic in nature, and accordingly not as large. They are, however, more plentiful. They range in size from 30 – 80m in length and width. Once again they are densely framed by the local fabric, which gives each secondary square a unique identity within the overall city. Each resident of the city should be within an 8-10 min walk of a secondary square.

Balcony, Porticos, and Porches. These are the smallest scaled spaces that serve as thresholds between the public and private sphere. Without them, there is a clear divide between the two realms, and little space for interaction between the two phases of urban life. They also provide hints for tourists of how people live within the city.

Private Realm. Let’s try to reduce the private realm to the few programmatic spaces in a dwelling that require it. This will break down territorial divides and provoke more social interaction within the city. Apartment walk-ups and densely packed row houses are ideal. Tall apartments are separated from the street, detaching themselves from the moving city while claiming parts of the sky. This creates an undesirable hierarchy within the city. Suburban or spaced housing units do not exist within the ‘good city’.

The Street. Primary streets should have provisions for vehicular traffic (2-3 lanes in each direction) and generous sidewalks. Larger roads should be lined with trees to reduce the scale and have public program along the ground floor to animate the street. Trees should be spaced between 8m and 16m depending on the level of enclosure required. Furthermore, the streets should contain areas for pause and lingering (benches, steps, and patios). Lastly, they need to have a high level of enclosure with consistent edge walls of 3-6 stories in height. Ideal street widths are between 25 and 35m, with a minimum sidewalk of 5m. Secondary streets are for pedestrians and/or 1-2 lanes of traffic. They are not lined with trees and their sidewalks are usually tighter (3m min.). Although narrower (10m in width), they force a large level social interaction because of their surrounding density. Commercial and public program should be located on grade with residential above. These streets still rise to the consistent height of 3-6 stories. Ideally, these streets would be paved with a rougher stone to accentuate the slower speeds that they operate at.

Blocks. The base unit of the fabric should balance between being a grid and a medieval town. The grid offers the advantages of a constant understanding of location as well as consistency in dimension. It does, however, get monotonous. The medieval town is highly disorienting making it difficult to offer a sense of place. Ideally, the city combines the consistency of a grid with the richness of the medieval block. In terms of sizes, the block should be large enough to contain public institutions and small enough to ensure solar penetration to all parts of the building(s). Recommended sizes for a continuous commercial block are 150-200m x 100-150m (courtyard blocks can veer to the larger limit). Residential fabric blocks should be approximately 50-80m x 100-120m to ensure sunlight. The different block types should be mixed throughout the city to provide richness. All blocks should be built to the edge.
Incorporating Contemporary Elements into the Good City

An Appendix

The following is an appendix to ‘A Recipe for a Good City’. It focuses more clearly on the components of the modern city (admixtures), and how they can be responsibly integrated into the city plan. These ‘extra’ ingredients are not required for a good city, but seem to continually surface in our contemporary city. This manifesto is an attempt to integrate these elements into the previous recipe and revisit the methodology to assembling the elements within the city. Once again, the underlying goal is to promote social interaction (community) and understanding within the city.

The Modern City. Preamble.

It is quite peculiar that designers have many great cities around the world, yet still cannot build a good city today. Although many of the great classical cities in the world grew and developed over time, we should still be able to design the base infrastructure for this process to transpire. The following ingredients are a few reoccurring elements in contemporary cities, that seem to be part of the reason of why we can no longer resurrect proven (working) city types. Perhaps, if we allow these elements to enter the argument, we can hypothesize how they can be incorporated responsibly into a city. There are several elements that we could discuss in the modern city; the ones presented below are what I feel to be the most crucial of the fabric, but should have a rhythm and scale relating to its surroundings, while being built to the block edge. The towers looming above should be set back from the base to offset their large presence. In all cases, towers should be strategically positioned to not throw a significant shadow onto public spaces or animated streets. For this reason, point towers are a favored type – as their small footprint usually ranges from 40 – 60 m in each direction. Lastly, towers should contain the same diversity and density as the city below. Imagine walking down a block with continuously consistent housing – no stores, parks, or public institutions to break this homogeneity. A tower could suffer the same mundane fate, and should therefore be programmed with diverse activities and spaces. All of the public program and space within the tower should be available to all, to avoid hierarchies within the city and promote a rich community. This ‘verti-city’ should be planned (perhaps with the same ingredients of a ‘good city’) as ‘free space’ was really ‘generic space’ and offered more confusion and emptiness than freedom. Ultimately, the tower could be used as an element to promote social interaction within the city, but should not be regarded as replacing the city.

The Park. The park has been a great achievement as well as a failure in many contemporary cities. For parks to be successful they need to be large enough to seem natural (i.e. not a square), yet small enough to create tangible spaces. This is not to say that you cannot have grand parks within a city – they must, however, be treated as separate ‘rooms’ tied together. This can be achieved with a differentiation in typography, speed (places of movement and places of pause), ground materials, and the use of different elements (water, trees, shrubs). It is difficult to attribute a typical size for a good park, as it is largely dependent on the ability to produce differentiation within the space as well as the scale and speed of the surrounding city. Park ‘rooms’ however, should be in the range of 120 – 150m in each direction. A modest sized park could be around 500 x 500m, allowing for several smaller spaces within. Lastly, parks should be placed in animated zones within the city, and fronted with sufficient public buildings to ensure their use. At night, they should be properly illuminated to allow for continuous inhabitation.

The Highway, The Car, and Parking. The car and the highway have become a part of, and have had a devastating effect on contemporary cities, and we must hypothesize how they can be synthesized into the urban fabric. Ideally, highways would be placed underground in all cities. This is preferred over raising them to allow the city to run below. If the highway cannot be buried, their points of entry into the city should be limited. Also, if the bridge solution is opted for, these should not be more than 15-20m in width without causing a psychological barrier. Another option is to raise the highway even further off the street, to psychologically separate it from the urban realm below and also more light to penetrate down onto the street. Within the city, the primary roads should separate the larger neighborhoods, and secondary roads should be used for local traffic within each neighborhood. Parking should be located underground at highway exits, as each exit should correspond to a large neighborhood or district center. If parking needs to be located on the surface, it should be contained in a parking deck that is scaled to and integrated in the surrounding fabric.

Sprawling Distances. The city has inevitably grown larger due to the use of the car. A couple of things to consider when accounting for ‘sprawl’. The problem with sprawl is that it implies an origin or center. When the city sprawls from the center, it often neglects to provide the amenities of the center to the surrounding neighborhoods. When these neighborhoods or districts become self-sufficient, they have no real public space or institutions. Therefore, we must treat each neighborhood or district like a small city, and provide it with all the ingredients of a good city on a reduced scale. Secondly, we must split up the city into neighborhoods that are conceivable on the human scale (about 1.5 km x 1.5 km). Primary roads can run around and connect these neighborhoods to one another, but the internal structure of each area is primarily pedestrian based. Despite the large scale of any city, the pedestrian should find a conceivable sense of place and scale within these neighborhoods/districts. Lastly, regardless of distances from the core, all new areas must be built to specifications in ‘What Makes a Good City?’ to avoid suburban “communities”.

New Infrastructures. New infrastructures such as WiFi, cell phone transmitters within subways, video internet stations, etc. should be incorporated into the city and allow access for all citizens. These can be used to animate public space, and pull inhabitants outside the private realm.

Indoor Shopping Mall. The primary problem of the indoor shopping mall is its immense scale, and the lack of dialogue with the surrounding fabric (they internalize themselves). The indoor shopping mall has obvious benefits over the exterior market, but it also has some crucial elements that must be detailed properly in the contemporary city. The shopping mall should be public – the streets should be opened to all, and be used in any manner the public sees fit. These streets
should be open 24 hours a day to allow the mall to be used as a public space in off hours (hence, consumption is secondary and public space is primary). The mall should take its scale (width of the street and height) from the surrounding fabric. Furthermore, the mall should mix its program to allow for a variety of public spaces within the street, and perhaps offices above. If the surrounding fabric dictates that a mall should be 3 storeys, shopping should only be located along grade. Two or more storey shopping malls should be avoided as they pull pedestrians off the street level and into an establishment. Lastly, the mall must interact with both its internal street and its edges. In a double loaded mall, stores should be facing onto two streets (the interior and exterior street), to offer two diverse experiences to the pedestrian. Perhaps the best precedent available is the Galleria in Milan.

**Iconic Monuments.** These seem to provide a sense of identity or collective vision to the contemporary city. In general, although it is their aim to be disparate from the fabric, they should create space, and not leave residual public space. Lastly, there should be some long term thinking of how they are placed and if their symbol will endure (as this will psychologically affect the use of the space). I will return to this at some point during my thesis.

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

1. Pick a site tied to a natural artifact that offers a sense of place.
2. Estimate direction and density of present habitation and future growth.
3. Layout the public spaces associated with the natural artifact, and have these ‘bleed’ out into growth estimate areas.
4. Locate the urban artifact/monuments, and disperse these throughout the city (again, based on estimates)
5. Cut the 2-4 lane highways and subway system underground. The placement and direction of the subway lines must work in conjunction with predicted growth patterns and the location of the urban artifacts (& their associated squares). Highways, particularly, can be placed early in the process as they are partially rooted in connection to other cities (which we will assumed are defined), and therefore we only need to understand their entrance points and exit ramps. Large parking decks should be place underground at this point as well.
6. Place the primary public squares where the urban artifacts encounter infrastructure. These should be distributed throughout the city fabric. These are the centers around which the fabric is draped.
7. Layout ‘neighborhoods’ or ‘districts’ tied to the public spaces. This will be used to set up the primary street structure.
8. Create primary streets (2-4 lane roads) related to the block size of each district. Set up a hierarchy between urban cores, which are tied to main roads, and neighborhood cores (secondary squares), which are tied to smaller roads. Avoid overspecialized in districts; try to keep the components evenly distributed within the fabric.
9. Place the secondary streets (1 lane or pedestrian) within the smaller fabric unit. These should be connected to primary streets as well as secondary squares.
10. Locate commercial and public functions along grade to animate the street and increase social interaction.
11. Distribute the offices and residential units within the fabric. Keep these within walking distance and not always separate. Mix different types of commerce and social-economic classes to promote diversity within each district. This can be achieved by having a neighborhood center on the intersection point of 4 neighborhoods, as opposed to the center of each individual neighborhood.
12. If admixtures need to be added, insert based on guidelines above.
13. Voila! A good city …
An Assessment of Urban Problems.

Building too Fast. The rapid expansion of post-World War II Alexandria has destroyed a large part of urban life that existed during the late 19th century city. Newer buildings are driven primarily through economic and ideological forces. Economically, buildings are grossly oversized and are fabricated of cheap materials. Ideologically, newer buildings are meant to be ‘modern’ – which essentially translates to ‘taller’. Both forces have given little consideration to the ground plane of the projects. Furthermore, new development is occurring so rapidly it does not seem to be part of a larger urban vision. Lastly, because there is little time between the materialization of urban projects, there is hardly time to assess and critique their successes (and failures).

Wanting Recognition from the Western World. This is perhaps more of an ideological problem within the city, but it has affected the choice of urban projects. The primary example of this is the New Bibliotheca Alexandria, which is rooted perhaps more in generic symbology than contextualism within the site. In essence, Alexandria is trying to import identity related to the Western world, as opposed to searching for and revealing their own eclectic identity. There has always been a large draw from the Western world to Alexandria. It is interesting to note that after gaining ‘independence’, they are still taking on urban projects to attract and relate to the Western World.

Lack of Structured Public Squares. The primary public squares do not offer enough enclosure. Not only are the surrounding buildings too large (in plan), they are all separated by streets. Another problem with the public spaces is their large provision for traffic and parking. Both Saad Zaghloul and Al Tahrir Square have large surface parking lots adjacent to the greens of the square. The oversized roads that encompass the square separate the buildings from the ‘public space’. This leaves the public space largely open to the sun, making it quite unpleasant to linger within the square during a large portion of the year. Lastly, the squares are covered in grass, which seems quite foreign to the climate and the city. While this makes the square seem special, it also creates a level of formality with contributes to its emptiness.

Public Spaces are Separated from Buildings. All of the major squares and public spaces are significantly separated from the adjacent buildings. The squares are all lined with 3-5 laned roads that effectively render the public space as the residual space of a roundabout. The beach and harbor are separated from the city due to the 6 laned Corniche. This ‘highway’ essentially creates a public zone to one side of the road that has access to the harbor, and a separated commercial zone (cafes, restaurants, etc.) that inhabits the ground level of the buildings. The primary dilemma in this is that it is difficult to animate spaces effectively without this connection. Buildings ensure people, and to have them connect directly to public spaces will result in more (or a higher probability of) activity within the public space.

The City belongs to the Car – Too many wide roads and too much parking. Not only does the Corniche and several roads that line the perimeter of the major squares seem to wide, other roads within the city are disproportionate to the building programs that line their edges. For instance, Horreya Street becomes an 8 laned street, when it ventures to the western (newer) part of the city. The street is predominately ruled by the car, leaving the pedestrian urban realm as a secondary space. Moreover, the distance between the buildings is also too large and there is not a sufficient amount of program to create a structured edge. This ‘openness’ relates to the speed of movement in the car, but is too large (and mundane) to walk through.

Lack of dialogue between the old and new. There is a lack of nostalgia for Ancient Alexandria, and many of the ‘ruins’ sites are clumsily handled throughout the city. For the most part, these are plots of void occurring quite randomly throughout the city. Although they have marketed these as tourist attractions, beyond this, there is little relationship between the old and the new. Developments occurring along these areas could be more responsive to this ancient context. Moreover, significant open (but structured) spaces could be developed around these sites to evoke a dialogue between the two cities.

Fabric > Stand Alone Fabric > Stand Alone. New buildings are being made larger and more separate from the fabric. There does not seem to be a master plan or vision for how these are handled. Essentially these have little relation to the ground plane, and create a monotonous block edge for the pedestrian.

Isolated Functions. The city is essentially comprised of districts (i.e. Residential, Commerce, Beach, etc.) that could be more interactive. The separation of functions animates certain parts of the city at certain times of the day, but leaves these areas empty at others. If there was more mixed used buildings within Alexandria, there would perhaps be more interaction between different socio-economic residents within the city, and continuous life throughout the city at all times of the day.

Civic Structure need mores Structure. The Eastern portion of the civic structure begins to fall apart. The shallat gardens could be better used to connect the university, library and Horreya Street. Furthermore, the connection between the shallat gardens and the train station could be strengthened by densifying the street edge. The park could also be less defined and spill out into the city, providing more linkage and therefore creating more inhabitation.
Project Proposal.

The two axes of the civic structure stemming from the New Bibliotheca Alexandria is worthy of a critical revision. The New Bibliotheca has received almost unanimous praise from the city. Because of this, we can assume that future urban projects within Alexandria will (if they have the budget to do so) take on the same methodology and ideology in creating public space. The library site has a potential of connecting the axes of the civic structure and creating a new core for the eastern edge of the city, as the city continues to develop to the east.

As a site, the location of the New Bibliotheca Alexandria is quite interesting. It is believed to be the location of the Ancient Alexandrian Library. Perhaps more important than this, in the contemporary city, is that it serves as one of two end nodes along the parabolic Corniche spanning all the way to the Qait Bey Fort. Along its other axes, the site is between the harbor and Corniche to one side, and the University of Alexandria, Shallat Gardens, and Horreya Street on the other. It therefore has great potential as the primary public space within the city as well as a connection point between two axes on the civic structure.

Issues.

The new project for the Bibliotheca Alexandria faces both a specific problem to its master plan as well as problems within the general city. I believe some of the issues with the project (both general and specific) are:

• The project, although adjacent to the harbor is quite separated from it due to the Corniche. It makes little attempt to move inhabitants to the small park across the 6-laned road.
• The library is highly inspired by the iconic form of urbanism. Although the function of the project in some ways was ‘to put Alexandria on the map’ (to the ‘Western’ world for the most part), it makes me suspicious of the longevity of the library and its associated public space. The library epitomizes the notion of the stand-alone building, with the reading room sitting in a pool of water. If we accept that Alexandria does, in fact, need an iconic building, the fabric around it should be clearly defined to allow the monument to be recognized.
• The public space created by the library is not formed, but rather residual. It gives little structure or enclosure to the residents. The majority of the enclosure to the site is provided by an existing building to the west.
• The link to the University Alexandria (to the south) is quite superficial. This is done through a bridge that cuts like a blade throughout the site and onto the University Campus. It is a symbolic gesture of a connection, but in fact does not seem to create a strong link.
• There is a park to the south of the Library Plaza that hovers between the University and the Library. This small park is not engaged in the project, and seems as residual as the plaza. The park has the ability to structure the plaza and reinforce the connection to the University.
• The Shallat Gardens could use more density at its edges and emphasize its connection to Horreya street as well as the train station.

Potential.

As an urban project, the site and program have the ability to:

• Address the idea of the Corniche and investigate ways to connect the city to the water
• Not rely on Iconic building as the primary symbol when creating public space.
• Structure the plaza so it does not seem residual. Also, increase enclosure within the plaza and stress the openness to the harbor.
• Strengthen the connection between the harbor and the University/ Shallat Gardens. Reinforce the two axes of the civic structure.
• Investigate methods for the park to connect into the city, and engage a participation of the city.
Examining the Southern Axis of the Civic Structure

Just as the gardens have the ability to penetrate through to the pier, they could also link the two squares to the south to the train station. Furthermore, the civic structure on the south requires a denser edge to create animation and connection.

Examining the Vertical Axis of the Civic Structure

Not only does the Corniche separate the city and the sea, there is little relationship between the University, Library and Shallat Gardens. Perhaps by blending the programs of the various elements along the vertical axis, we can inspire some movement and connection. Ideally, the gardens would have a linear (street) connection to the library and sea, as well as a meandering (park) connection. Furthermore, if we can rid the distinctions between the components we can expect more interaction between the parts and less territorial divides. This garden has the ability to meander through the pier and potentially connect around the harbour.

The current situation is comprised of isolated functions with little interaction.
Connect Pier to Shallat Garden

By connecting the Pier to the Shallat Gardens, we can make a primary internal connection to the library. Because the library does not face onto a primary vertical street, this green connection can serve as one of its primary entrances.

Strengthen Vertical Edges

By strengthening the vertical edges of the University, it is able to be identified as one entity. This forces the animated zones to the street or the internal green spine. In its current state, the university has too many open spaces and no hierarchy of which ones to use.

Identify Existing Campus for Demolition

These campus buildings have been identified for demolition. The buildings in the south-west area of the campus do not obey any logic of the campus and create difficult open spaces and street conditions. The buildings on the northern edge of the campus interrupt an axial line created by the bridge.

Extend the Library to the Campus and Pier

By extending the library to the pier and University campus, it reduces territorial divides between the programs. Furthermore, the extension also allows the pier to further act as a monument for the library, physically pulled from the fabric and pulling pedestrians across to the harbor.
Pedestrian Bridge
Advantages
• Keep the existing Roadway
• Bridges are small in scale, and do not create a large divide between the shore and city
• Bridges run perpendicular to the harbor, and therefore cause less interruption between the sea and city

Disadvantages
• Pedestrians are forced to take a detour, and hierarchy is given to the vehicular traffic.

Pedestrian Tunnel
Advantages
• Keep the existing Roadway
• Tunnels do not cause visual interference at grade

Disadvantages
• Pedestrians are forced to take a detour, and hierarchy is given to the vehicular traffic.
• Expensive and difficult to create the tunnels.

Vehicular Bridge
Advantages
• Allow continuous flow of pedestrian realm
• Give hierarchy to pedestrians

Disadvantages
• Creates a ‘metaphysical’ barrier between the sea and city

Vehicular Tunnel
Advantages
• Allow continuous flow of pedestrian realm
• Give hierarchy to pedestrians
• Tunnels do not cause visual interference at grade

Disadvantages
• Expensive and difficult to carry out.

This is a preferred scheme as it creates the continuous flow to the water’s edge. It is intended that the Corniche be buried only along the downtown waterfront of Alexandria.
ALEXANDRIA
REDEVELOPING THE CORNICHE
The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Existing Condition

The Corniche is effectively a 35m wall between the library site and the waterfront. Not only is it wide, it hosts a large volume of high-speed traffic, making it virtually impenetrable. The conceptual studies on the previous page explore different options to connect the pedestrians from the city to the sea. The final option of tunneling the traffic is preferred as it allows for a continuous public realm and no visible barriers. This tunnel is suggested for the stretch of the Corniche between the Fort Quait Bey and the Library site.

Proposed Condition

The proposed Corniche groups the highway and a proposed subway system and places them below grade. Essentially this creates two terraces which can be animated in different manners. The top terrace is largely animated by the buildings along the cornice and market stalls. The lower terrace is animated by restaurants and cafes that are built into the edge wall. A small street of three lanes distributes a minimal amount of local traffic.
Redeveloped Civic Structure

Through strengthening the connection through the university and on the south edge of the civic structure, it defines the extent of the downtown core. By structuring the edges it is easy to anticipate and design the areas of public gathering.
ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSED SCHEME

ALEXANDRIA
The Massachusetts Institute of Technology
COMPARATIVE STUDY

ALEXANDRIA
The Massachusetts Institute of Technology
ALEXANDRIA
The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

COMPARATIVE STUDY

View from the North - Existing

View from the North - Proposed

View from the South - Existing

View from the South - Proposed
ALEXANDRIA

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

PROPOSED CAMPUS

View from the North-East - Proposed