

Heart for the Poor: What is a Just City?

Last week I talked about our water being shut off, damaged telephone cables cut the phones to the TEAR Fund offices for four days that same week. During the night we were woken to plaintive dying beeps of our bedside phone as the battery failed due to a storm taking out the power in Mt Roskill. As I stumbled around in the dark looking for a transistor (you will laugh, the batteries in our cell phones and my wife's watch had expired and I wanted to know the time) I thought this is unjust! Why does our part of town keep going down? The wind and rain was buffeting our house and setting off alarms in the street, sleep was out of the question so I made a cup of tea (we cook with gas) and pondered "what does justice have to do with a city and should planners take justice into account?"

I came across a lecture given by Susan Fainstein. She said the left has typically attacked planning for its class bias, for its anti-democratic character, and for not taking account of difference. The right sees planning as denying freedom and producing inefficiency and regards markets as the best allocators of urban space. Centrists consider planning undemocratic and unattainable and see efforts to redesign cities as indifferent to people's comfort and desires. Phew! So how do we get the Auckland Supercity right?

One answer might be Amartya Sen's capabilities approach. Capabilities are what people are able to do and be; not how they actually function but rather what they have the opportunity to do. According to this reasoning, each person must be treated as an end in themselves and not the means to the planners ends. It needs to be acknowledged that there is a line below which human functioning is not possible if they don't have certain opportunities. It's complicated though, in granting people the capability to do everything they want to, who is going to pay? I read this morning the cost of planning for the Supercity has blown out to \$117m, how do we avoid imposing an unacceptable burden on the better-off? But then is it right to create a lively city with attractive amenities that only the well off can enjoy? How do we determine the payback for what is spent on things like roads, sports stadiums and rugby world cups? Some would say these calculations exaggerate benefits, underestimate costs but do not spell out who benefits.

What does the Bible say about "Just Cities"? Not a lot. We are given a model in the description of the new Jerusalem, but I am not sure how the Supercity planners would buy into "streets of gold" in their brief to turn out a new city in a few short months. The Bible does have a lot to say about justice though, and by looking at that we can gain insight into God's priorities. On the bottom of TEAR Fund's letter head is part of Isaiah 1:17 *...learn to do right. Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, please the case of the widow.*

This speaks to me of ensuring the vulnerable are protected. There are many non-government organisations that are doing a great job around the city in this area; the new council must continue to support their efforts. Having worked on TEAR Fund's Microenterprise programme for the past 15 years, I say to the planners you must create the right environment for small as well as large businesses to flourish. I saw a presentation last night from the Auckland Regional Transport Authority who are suggesting that \$21.5 billion be spent on public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure between now and 2040 because there will not be enough space on, or for, more roads to move people around in their cars. I believe a just city is one where everyone can get to where they want to go even if they don't have a car. In case you were wondering the power came on again in time to make breakfast before pedalling off to work. I would be interested in your thoughts on what is a just city. Go to doingfreedom.wordpress.com

Prayer: Father God, you set priorities in your word that reflect your heart for the poor. We pray that these might emerge in the governance of our towns and cities. Grant our leaders wisdom as they make decisions that affect those they have responsibility for; inspire righteousness in the hearts of those making commercial decisions today. Give us the courage to seek justice and encourage the oppressed. Amen

Richard Barter

List of values that urbanists generally regard as goods and bads: Won't mention these, but they will be uploaded with the notes.

1. public space
 - a. bad: lack of access, homogeneity
 - b. good: heterogeneity
2. quality of built environment
 - a. bad: inauthenticity, conformist architecture
 - b. good: historical accuracy; cutting edge architecture
3. planning
 - a. bad: rule of experts
 - b. good: citizen participation
4. social control
 - a. Bad: order/domination
 - b. Resistance/conflict
5. housing
 - a. bad: luxury dwellings
 - b. good: affordable units
6. segregation
 - a. bad: exclusion
 - b. good : mixing, even if conflictual
7. mega-projects
 - a. bad: large, top-down planned
 - b. good: popular, incremental, preservation
8. social services
 - a. bad: privatization, individualization
 - b. good: collective consumption
9. economic development
 - a. bad: entrepreneurial state
 - b. good: small business, cooperatives
10. environment
 - a. bad: laissez-faire
 - b. good: regulation; green development

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