

# ORDER WITHOUT DESIGN



Rachael Williams

While urban planners seek to develop plans and strategies for communities to accommodate growth, they do not adequately consider the role of urban economics and market forces in the development of large metropolitan cities.

This is the essence of renowned urban planner **Alain Bertaud's** book, *Order Without Design* and the focus of a recent talk at **Ryerson University's Centre for Urban Research and Land Development**.

Bertaud provided the audience with a glimpse into what he considers to be major flaws in the urban planning profession and the associated impacts on infrastructure, mobility and housing affordability. He concludes that urban planners need to evolve by incorporating urban economics into local decision-making.

"There is this dichotomy between spontaneous order, which is grassroots, coming from the market, and then the planning process, where you have to design land use systems, urban transport systems, and this is top-down, by the city, it's not emerging from the market. So it's a superimposition of these two things," he said.

At its core, Bertaud said there are fundamental

differences between how planners and economists think. Urban planners are "normative", advocating for cities that are sustainable, livable and resilient, without defining quantitative indicators that measure progress in achieving that objective. Urban economists, on the other hand, rely on mathematical models to represent cities. They study how markets shape cities and develop quantitative models that are useful in understanding the impact of income, cost of transportation and land prices on the development of cities.

The problem is that although this top-down view of how to plan a city is vital to establishing city-wide infrastructure, it clouds a planner's vision of what cities are and the extent to which they can be master-planned.

"Cities are primarily labour markets," noted Bertaud. "Yes, life in a city is much more than just going to work and coming back home after that, but everything we like in a city – meeting our friends in a café, going to a restaurant, concerts, jogging by the lake – is only possible if there is a labour market which functions well."

Looking at the evolution of cities and labour markets across the world for the past

century, Bertaud breaks down how trip patterns are structured by the labour market and why urban planners' utopian view of "complete communities" is impractical. In the classic monocentric spatial model of the city, people lived in the suburbs and commuted to the urban core to get to work. As the automobile became more affordable to the middle-class, that model evolved into the "dispersed model", with no real organized pattern of travel between residence and employment.

Presently, the most common model of trip patterns and types of jobs spatial distribution is known as the "composite model", whereby employers cluster in different areas across large metropolitan cities and employees travel to and from the inner and outer suburbs to these clusters for work.

Although downtown Toronto and the airport megazone are Toronto's core employment areas, a strong labour market also exists in the city's centres and avenues, urban growth centres and in core employment areas where traditional manufacturing, warehousing and product assembly exist.

Despite these prevailing market trends, Bertaud suggests urban planners are shifting towards the "urban village" model, where people live and work in master-planned communities. The benefits of the urban village model are plentiful – it reduces the need for investment in transportation and roads, it reduces the number of vehicle kilometres traveled and the amount of greenhouse gas emissions and it promotes active transportation.

But according to Bertaud,

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this model contradicts the economic justification of large cities – the efficiency of large labour markets. Employers do not select their employees based on their places of residence; neither do specialized workers select their jobs based on proximity to their homes.

“The urban village model implies a systematic fragmentation of labour markets in a large metropolis and does not make economic sense in the real world,” he noted.

In his book, Bertaud criticizes urban planners for overregulating the market-driven development of cities, claiming that these regulations are responsible for the housing affordability challenges that big cities are experiencing. For example, planners subscribe to the idea that there are optimal densities that must be accommodated through regulation. This regulation can come in the form of zoning, minimum setback requirements, floor space index, street width, sunlight exposure, parking requirements and so on.

“The objective of zoning has been to limit growth, and to make any change in cities extremely expensive and difficult,” noted Bertaud. “It

paralyzes new construction and prevents innovation.”

Using New York City’s stringent zoning requirements as an example, Bertaud said that the overregulation of housing has led to a trade-off between space and consumption. The city’s planning department mandates density requirements and number of dwelling units per acre. This has led to developers having to provide a certain number of larger, two-bedroom apartments. But the high price of these larger units has resulted in a lack of demand for them and those in need of housing are forced to move into illegal units or live in garages.

“Why not just develop something specifically addressing this problem?” he asked.

The **City of Toronto** faces similar criticism from the development industry over its aggressive regulations, delays in permit issuance and archaic zoning that is not in line with the city’s Official Plan. But as **Hemson Consulting** partner **Russell Mathew** notes, Toronto’s rigorous planning regulations do not always translate on the ground. For example, he said south of Queen Street, in the King-Spadina area, the height limit for a building is 12 storeys,

but many of the buildings that are constructed in the area far exceed that limit.

“Essentially, there is this idea of a regulation, but it’s virtually unregulated in reality because you can pretty much build as much density and height as you want,” he said.

Bertaud recommends increasing housing supply by removing regulatory barriers on densities and apartment sizes and increasing land supply by building new and faster transportation systems. He also suggests that simplifying building permit procedures, reducing permit processing times and allowing different housing forms to co-exist side-by-side will help address the housing affordability issue.

In addition to deregulation, Bertaud said urban planners should play a more active role in mobility planning. Improved urban transport increases the availability of land for housing and allows lower income people to live in areas that are both affordable and accessible to most of the city.

Commending Bertaud for his contribution to the urban planning literature, **Ryerson School of Urban and Regional Planning** assistant professor **Matthias Sweet** said it is critical for planners to change as the environments in which they work are exposed to new realities.

“The pressures for planners to evolve are palpable,” said Sweet. “Society has changed, old solutions have become new problems. The original

tools we have used in planning have evolved and continue to change...Planning can and should borrow more strongly from economics.”

Sweet went one step further, adding the industry should also be adopting principles from environmental science, urban design and public policy to ensure planners continue to serve the public interest while respecting the role of private market forces. 🌱