

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

# THE BENIGN CITY

**ROBERT G. MACDONALD**

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

*My city is a city on a memorable and mythical river with a network of streets that span and intersect each other. To go from one edge to another you have the choice between land, boat and tunnel.*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The author of this paper is President Emeritus of the Liverpool Architectural Society, a WAN (World Architecture News) International Health Care Judge and Reader in Architecture, Liverpool John Moores University. He has practiced in Africa, Glasgow and Liverpool and is the editor of the online publication *DIY City*. He is developing an online research project about therapeutic environments and has been commissioned to write on the relationship between the built environment & dementia. He has been invited as a VIP Guest to The DIMHN (Design in Mental Health Network) in Birmingham, UK, and in 2014 was awarded The Roscoe Citizenship Award. His city is Liverpool.

In 1923 The psychologist C. G. Jung dreamt that the city of Liverpool was the 'Pool of Life'. For this author, it is his city of vitality - primarily a city of the soul. In that spirit, the following narrative represents a non-scientific stream of consciousness that draws together many different influences, in time, space and place. It is focused on Liverpool but is premised on the idea that it may be possible to psychoanalyse a city as Sigmund Freud might have done, or that we can acknowledge the soul of a city as Jung would have done.<sup>2</sup> It explores thoughts on the notion of the *benign city*.

The idea of benign cities was discussed at *The Benign City Workshop* at Liverpool University, on the 12th March 2014.<sup>3</sup> This paper comes out of thoughts around that event can considers Liverpool, as with many other cities, as a place we can define as "getting better" after the "illness" decline or shrinkage.<sup>4</sup> As a city in "decline" some may also compare places like Liverpool to a body or mind in a state of depression.<sup>5</sup> The medical model of benign, as in a tumour, suggests a dormant state – perhaps an apt analogy. In contrast to the overwhelming negative view of depression or tumors however, it may also be possible to think of the benign as fostering its counterpoint, vitality – as Andrew Soloman has done.<sup>6</sup>

The word benign can mean gentle, warm and friendly and a *Benign City* can be essentially a Healthy City, as developed and considered by Professor Dr John Ashton and The World Health Organisation Healthy Cities initiative. A Benign City is, in this sense, seen as a counterweight to The Shrinking City and becomes vital to urban recovery. As described in the narrative of Esmedune,<sup>7</sup> or in the more factual text *Healthy Cities* by Jason Corburn,<sup>8</sup> the Benign City can rise from the ashes like the mythical Phoenix.

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

It is the argument of this text that there are a variety of comparable and complex ways that Benign Cities can re-develop and reconstruct themselves; commercially, through their community spirit and activities, through arts projects such as the Liverpool Biennial, and through Situationism. A Benign City then, is a dormant city that is capable of re-inventing itself through various forms of positive growth and the discovery of new relevant industries, activities, cultures, and more – an in this sense, it reflects ideas that this author has examined in previous texts which revolve around the idea that Liverpool is a collective urban ‘laboratory of shadows’.<sup>9</sup>

In 2008, Liverpool was European Capital of Culture and declared World Heritage City. Since then there has been a deep economic recession and urban shrinkage has continued in the outer city. However, the Local State<sup>10</sup> has become more self-reliant and discovered new forms of DIY<sup>11</sup>; new forms of economic retail; alternative strategies for planning have emerged, and new developments in community architecture have been seen. The city has three modern civic universities, City Pride,<sup>12</sup> and now an elected City Mayor - all contributing to what can be defined as ‘urban stability’.<sup>13</sup> Some might argue that Liverpool is thriving. However, in contrast to this positive picture, parts of the inner and outer city suffer from high unemployment and by all European social and economic standards it remains a very unhealthy city. There are also many ‘inner city’ areas that remain in a state of economic depression and can be easily defined as ‘deprived’. Liverpool then, evidences all the contradictions of what we expect from a Benign City.

## LIVERPOOL - THE BENIGN AND THE CONTRADICTIONARY

**The Commercial City:** *Liverpool One* is a new commercial and retail district in the city centre that attracts large numbers of visitors and tourists. It was based on a major Urban Design Master Plan led by twenty five architects and a single land owner, the Duke of Westminster. It was completed over four years ago and is a highly popular and successful retail redevelopment.<sup>14</sup> It is typical of many commercially led regeneration projects across Europe and is often signposted as an indication of the city’s ‘economic vitality’.

**Community and the pro-social city:** In very different circumstances, The Eldonian Village represents a major redevelopment of a former industrial site into new dwellings and community facilities. It developed gradually over thirty years and was led by a resident community based cooperative association. In 1987 The Eldonian Urban Neighbourhood, adjacent to The Liverpool docks, won the *Times RIBA Award* as the most outstanding example of community enterprise in the UK. In August 2004 The United Nations granted the same community a World Habitat Award - a first for any community based project in the UK. It is an example of what this author has defined as a pro-social DIY City.<sup>15</sup>

**The city of the arts:** In 2008, according to fashion magazine *Vogue*, “it was all happening in ‘Liver-cool!’” The *Sunday Times* said it was “glam up north”. Liverpool was populated by “up for it, shopping and grooming mad women”. ‘Liver-cool’ was given a real media moment. Over 350 events took place: music, visual arts, performing arts, street-theatre, architecture, sport and heritage activities. 2008 was a “celebration of culture for everyone”. Highlights included The *Turner Prize* being hosted in the city; a Gustav Klimt Exhibition; performances by Sir Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr; The Tall Ships Race being held of the River Mersey; Sir Simon Rattle conducting the Berlin Philharmoniker at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall; The 5th International Biennial in the city; the hosting of the MTV Europe Music Awards; and a Le Corbusier exhibition in the Metropolitan Cathedral Crypt. The city

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

was being promoted and ‘regenerated’ through the cultural industries.

**The city post-arts:** Following Liverpool's acknowledgement as the 2008 European Capital of Culture, the city has continued to host art and cultural events in a way not seen in this generation. Examples include the Liverpool Sound City, Light Night, Africa Oye, the Liverpool Biennial<sup>16</sup>; the International Festival of Contemporary Art, and the spectacle of the Sea Odyssey "Giants". These artistic moments have been closely entwined with the city and its heritage and have consequently provided an opportunity for Liverpool's architectural culture to be utilised. Specifically, the Biennial has engaged with public spaces, derelict buildings and the cultural institutions of the city.

**The shrinking city:** Alongside the developments that have taken place, and the arts events the city has seen, Liverpool still has large areas of vacant land in the inner city waiting to be explored, appreciated and developed. Despite the success of the *Liverpool One* shopping development in the city centre, there is still evidence of urban shrinkage in residential areas. Indeed, Liverpool was identified by The Shrinking Cities Programme as a ‘shrinking city’ and, thus, an area in decline. Detroit and Rust Belt cities of the US are comparable in many ways.

**The exploited city:** All the contradictions one sees in a place like Liverpool pose the question, who has benefited most from the retail and commercial developments that have been so visible in the city in recent years? The same question can be asked of its arts events. Many areas of the city remained cultural deserts during the 2008 events and, with further government cuts to funding for areas in the North of England, the problem of lack of access to cultural and artistic opportunities – not to mention derelict buildings, unused land and lack of community and civic spaces – looks likely to increase in the deprived areas of the city.

## THOUGHTS ON THE BENIGN AND THE CONTRADICTIONARY – WHAT OUR CITIES NEED

Liverpool then, can be seen as a microcosm of the contradictions of any Benign City – a place in which problems exist and answers can be found; a place out of whose decline a re-emergence can occur. It is a place and, a series of processes, that gives us multiple ideas of what the Benign City of the future, here and in other places, needs to have, should have, could have and could be. Some of those ideas include the following.

**Education and the city:** Benign Cities need radical re-education following the ideas of Ivan Illich and de-schooling society.<sup>17</sup> New free universities are called for where social history is used and not mis-used. Learning to read is vital to facilitate the widest possible access to knowledge and, as such, institutions such as the International Reading Organisation, now a Global phenomenon, have to find a home in our cities.<sup>18</sup>

**The engaged city:** We must ask how people can participate in remaking cities and architecture. For example, there are over 26,000 schools in the UK for 4-18 year olds that remain largely empty in the evenings and during holidays. Underused schools are missed opportunities that are socially excluding knowledge and wellbeing. If we harness these spaces for the *University of The Third Age* we can contribute to the formation of partnerships and the building of stronger communities.<sup>19</sup> The people of our cities have the imagination needed to do this.

**The socially connected city:** Social networking, weaving hubs, spokes, core and periphery are now on the new social and health agenda. We must ensure people interact and engage with each other in

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

the Benign City. Our cities will have to be therapeutic - places in which walking is a priority for example. More cars in a street mean less community friendships.

**The healthy city:** Questions such as obesity need to be raised in our cities to counter 'food deserts' – those areas in cities in which healthy food is hard to come by under the barrage of fast food outlets and convenience stores selling processed products. Local authorities have the power to control the location of all kinds of food stores across the city and can, should, intervene in issues like these.

**The city aging and the home:** Benign City has to be an Age Friendly City for the growing population of 60 plus. Issues such as security at home, healthy sleeping patterns, socialness and neighbourliness are important and increase life expectancy. The aging process has to be something that doesn't mean a loss of independence. Urban research has to be focused such 'real' issues.

**The city of streets:** The places we live in need to be designed with people in mind. How can we encourage pro-social behaviour and ensure safe streets? How can streets be more active, and can we learn from games' theory, alleys and urban playing? Here we need to consider the city as a habitat for humans, animals and birds. Indeed, trees are as vital in the urban street scape as buildings.

**The historic city:** There is still much to learn from the iconic setting of the small town and the history of town gatherings in older cities. Theorists of yesterday still have lessons to offer - Christopher Alexanders' pattern statements, Jane Jacobs community driven thinking, and Kevin Lynch's modelling forms.<sup>20</sup> Might the modern version of a medieval city be relevant to the 21st Century?

**Forgotten Places and People:** Benign Cities are made of forgotten and hidden spaces.<sup>21</sup> These are secret spaces off the tourist tracks. In these places life goes on outside the strict control of planners, architects and politicians. The vibrancy in these places give us all the evidence we need that the solutions to the problems of our cities don't have to lie in outside investment and outside control or design. Regeneration can be kick started using the assets and architecture already possessed by the communities in our cities. Using collaborative social engagement, small gestures can create spectacular intrusions over time. Vacant land and derelict buildings can be transformed by people themselves. Communities can be re-engaged with the areas in which they live.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS and STREAMS.....

For a short time in 2008 Liverpool forgot its problems and had a carnival. Mersey-pride was back in the air and for some people at least, "the glimpse of a future made a fleeting appearance." In that context a text this author wrote some years ago comes to mind. *Esmedune 2000: Vision of Dream*<sup>22</sup> is a narrative about a future Healthy City and a changing river; a city built on slavery and the Golden Triangle of Trade. It is a text about a barefoot doctor walking through the city in an anthropological way. In it, the city is seen as a Phoenix rising through renewal and urban transformation.

The free thinking of *Esmedune 2000: Vision of Dream* is the type of thinking we need to apply to the future of our cities. This type of thinking will not come from government or regulators and, as a result, Benign Cities and their regions will need to be given greater responsibility for their own futures.<sup>23</sup> Why can't we make a hydro-electric barrage a cross the River Mersey, make it work, and use it to foster a new Renaissance? Why can't we build new housing for the people of the city and find land for community developers? Why can't we work in new ways?

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

It is true that cities are made and remade through political and economic processes but new responsible societies need to be nurtured at grass roots level too. Here we find the creative imagination and the will to create and develop healthy, sustainable and creative new places and communities. Central to this ambition however is public participation in the making of our declining, failing and ill cities.

It was mentioned at the outset of this paper that we can think of an analogy between a dormant, benign or shrinking city and the state of depression. We can also think of it as analogous to a person with classical pneumonia. In both cases it can continue down the vortex of disintegration, or it can recover on the strength of its own systems. It can cure itself from within. A new age city is a possibility... but participation, autonomy and collaboration are central to it. Urban change is feasible on this basis. Yes it happens through external intervention, but it also happens on the basis of people's own initiative. Liverpool reveals this.

---

### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Calvino, Italo. 1974. *Invisible cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

<sup>2</sup> The relationship between definitions and understandings of cities and psychology has a long history threaded through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has been dealt with extensively in the writings of Anthony Vidler. See: Vidler, Anthony. 2000. *Warped space art, architecture, and anxiety in modern culture*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press; Vidler, Anthony. 2008. *Histories of the immediate present inventing architectural modernism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>3</sup> The Benign City (2014) Workshop Liverpool University, Foresight Centre. 12th March 2014, with appreciation to Professor Rhiannon Corcoran and Dr Jane Rees. The content of this paper emerged from musings during and after the workshop. Acknowledgement must therefore be given to the speakers: David McAleavey (Free Co-operation Higher Education: A Practice that Aspires), Minna Lyons (Does Knowledge of local history increase pro social behaviour exploring the links through experimental psychology), Cherie McCracken (Age Friendly Cities), Emma Boyland (Determinants of obesity : The role of the Built Environment), Nicola Headlam (Net methods for a therapeutic city), Hilary Dreaves/Thomas Fischer (The role of impact assessment in the development of policies, plans, programmes and projects for benign cities), Norma Raynes (The Role of the school : a model for accessing this resource to contribute to the making of benign cities), Robert Huxford (An idiots guide to research based urban design and management), Graham Marshall (Place making with people in mind), Professor Andre Brown (The architecture of Benign Cities), Tom Dickens (Urban behavioural ecology), Sophie Povey (The Reader at Calderstones), Robert G MacDonald (DIY City & Drawing of City), Professor John Ashton (The Ecocity and Health in the 21st Century), Mick McKeown (Democratising our cities: civic voice in the context of mental health), Rosie Mansfield (Relative Inequality: Testing the Wilkinson and Pickett Hypothesis), Sophie Wickham (Inequality and psychosis: Search for specificity) , Katie Bristow (Improving equity of access to primary care mental health-the AMP model), Rhiannon Corcoran (Places Change Minds: Design Matters), Andy Barwell (Things, Stuff and Folk: Notes from Somewhere else), Future directions - discussion led by Professor Rhiannon Corcoran.

<sup>4</sup> Oswalt, Philipp (ed.). 2006. *Atlas of Shrinking Cities, Atlas der schrumpfenden Stadte*. Hatje Cantz, Berlin.

<sup>5</sup> Hollander, Justine B. 2011. *Sunburst Cities, The Great Recession, Depopulation and Urban Planning in the American Sunbelt*. London, Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Solomon, Andrew. Ted Talk: *How the worst moments in our lives make us who we are*. Filmed, March, 2014. Vancouver, Canada.  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/andrew\\_solomon\\_how\\_the\\_worst\\_moments\\_in\\_our\\_lives\\_make\\_us\\_who\\_we\\_are](http://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_solomon_how_the_worst_moments_in_our_lives_make_us_who_we_are)

<sup>7</sup> Ashton, John. MacDonald, Robert. *Esmedune 2000, Healthy Cities, Vision or Dream?*  
<http://www.johnrashton.securemachines.co.uk/documentbank/Esmedune%202000.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Corburn, Jason. 2013. *Healthy City Planning, from neighbourhood to national health equality*. London, Routledge.

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

---

<sup>9</sup> MacDonald, Robert . "City as Laboratory of Shadows". In: G. Cairns (ed.), *Architecture, Media, Politics, Society*. Vol. 3, No.4. January 2014. <http://architecturemp.com/back-issues/>

<sup>10</sup> For a definition, see: Cockburn, Cynthia. "The Local State, questions what became of The Local State? Neo-Liberalism, Community development and Local Government". In: Mick Carpenter (ed.), *Community Development Journal*. Oxford University Press. 2010.

<sup>11</sup> The emphasis of DIY City is on the potential of community urban development. Not all architecture is made by star architects; artists, communities and others have a role to play. For an expanded description, see: MacDonald, Robert (ed.) *DIY City*. 2008. Liverpool John Moores University Press, Liverpool.

<sup>12</sup> City Pride, as used here, refers to pride in a city by its inhabitants of all persuasions. City Pride or Liverpool Pride is also a weekend festival to celebrate Liverpool culture, but specifically gay culture, , held annually in the city. It now has an audience of 75,000. Up until 2010 Liverpool was the largest British City not to hold a Pride Event.

<sup>13</sup> Urban Stability is seen as either neutral or unstable. Stable conditions tend to occur in small urban complexes and can effect health and industry positively. A city achieving improved Urban Stability shows better conditions in public health, employment and industrial production. For a definition, see: Vaucher Gail. *Eight Stable Urban Environmental Characteristics*. Army Research Laboratory, White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico. 2014.

<sup>14</sup> For an outline, see: MacDonald , Robert. *Architect in Paradise*. Discussion and debate about the Liverpool One retail district in: Louise Thomas and Sebastian Loew (eds.) *Urban Design Journal*, Summer Issue, 2008. No.107, pp 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> MacDonald, Robert (ed.) *DIY City*, 2010. ebook. Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores University Academic Profile.

<sup>16</sup> Information on the Biennale provided by Elizabeth Edge. The Architecture of Bienniels, MRes Postgraduate Dissertation at Liverpool John Moores University.

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Illich (1926 –2002) was an Austrian social critic. His most celebrated work was *Deschooling Society* (1971) in which he criticised education as practiced in modern economies. He argued it was institutionalized and posited self-directed education. See: Illich, Ivan. 1971. *Deschooling society*. New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>18</sup> The International Reading Association (IRA) is an international professional organization. Created in 1956 its aim is to improve reading instruction, facilitate dialogue about research on reading, and encourage the habit of reading.

<sup>19</sup> The *University of the Third Age* is an international organization whose aims are the education and stimulation of mainly retired members of the community - those in their third 'age' of life. See: <http://www.u3a.org.uk/>

<sup>20</sup> See for example: Alexander, Christopher, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. 1977. *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction*. New York: Oxford University Press; Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The death and life of great American cities*; Lynch, Kevin. 1960. *The image of the city*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

<sup>21</sup> Information provided by Catherine Traynor, a founding member of RAAD who apply a situationalist approach to urbanism and have developed projects that set out to discover forgotten, unknown and secret urban spaces. They are based in Liverpool.

<sup>22</sup> Ashton, John. 1988. *Esmedune 2000: vision of dream, a healthy Liverpool*. Department of Public Health, University of Liverpool Press.. pp3-47.

<sup>23</sup> The Heseltine Institute for Public Policy and Practice. *Charting New Territory for public policy and practice*, 2014. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press.

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

---

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, Christopher, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. 1977. *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction*. New York: Oxford University Press; Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The death and life of great American cities*; Lynch, Kevin. 1960. *The image of the city*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Ashton, John. 1988. *Esmedune 2000: vision of dream, a healthy Liverpool*. Department of Public Health, University of Liverpool Press.. pp3-47.

Calvino, Italo. 1974. *Invisible cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Cockburn, Cynthia. "The Local State, questions what became of The Local State? Neo-Liberalism, Community development and Local Government". In: Mick Carpenter (ed.), *Community Development Journal*. Oxford University Press. 2010.

Corburn, Jason. 2013. *Healthy City Planning, from neighbourhood to national health equality*. London, Routledge.

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy and Practice. *Charting New Territory for public policy and practice*, 2014. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press.

Hollander, Justine B. 2011. *Sunburst Cities, The Great Recession, Depopulation and Urban Planning in the American Sunbelt*. London, Routledge.

Illich, Ivan. 1971. *Deschooling society*. New York: Harper & Row.

MacDonald, Robert . "City as Laboratory of Shadows". In: G. Cairns (ed.), *Architecture, Media, Politics, Society*. Vol. 3, No.4. January 2014. <http://architecturemps.com/back-issues/>

MacDonald, Robert (ed.) *DIY City*. 2008. Liverpool John Moores University Press, Liverpool.

MacDonald , Robert. *Architect in Paradise*. Discussion and debate about the Liverpool One retail district in: Louise Thomas and Sebastian Loew (eds.) *Urban Design Journal*, Summer Issue, 2008. No.107, pp 24-25.

MacDonald, Robert (ed.) *DIY City*, 2010. ebook. Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores University Academic Profile. Oswalt, Philipp (ed.). 2006. *Atlas of Shrinking Cities, Atlas der schrumpfenden Stadte*. Hatje Cantz, Berlin.

Solomon, Andrew. Ted Talk: *How the worst moments in our lives make us who we are*. Filmed, March, 2014. Vancouver, Canada.  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/andrew\\_solomon\\_how\\_the\\_worst\\_moments\\_in\\_our\\_lives\\_make\\_us\\_who\\_we\\_are](http://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_solomon_how_the_worst_moments_in_our_lives_make_us_who_we_are)

Vaucher Gail. *Eight Stable Urban Environmental Characteristics*. Army Research Laboratory, White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico. 2014.

Vidler, Anthony. 2000. *Warped space art, architecture, and anxiety in modern culture*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press

Vidler, Anthony. 2008. *Histories of the immediate present inventing architectural modernism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.