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New towns on the Cold War frontier

How modern urban planning was exported as an instrument in the battle for the developing world

Constantinos Doxiadis, the architect who during the 1950s and 1960s built new towns throughout the Middle East and Africa, was a leading figure in US Cold War policy. While hoping to inculcate democratic and free-market values in the developing world, the New Towns failed to take into account indigenous traditions. Today, Doxiadis's urban neighbourhoods have become something quite different to what he anticipated: Sadr city, Baghdad's giant slum, for example, where typhoid and hepatitis epidemics rage and which is now the backdrop for a new type of urban warfare. The most that can be said for Doxiadis's New Towns, says Michelle Provoost, was that they had in mind an ideal — precisely what the US programme to restore democracy in contemporary Iraq lacks.

Looking at the cities that were built from scratch during the 1950s and 1960s all over the world, it is astonishing to see how world population growth was accommodated along very similar lines in places very remote and different in culture and political background. A similar strategy and design method was applied in the construction of the *villes nouvelles* around Paris, the new towns close to London, the new parts of Stockholm, or cities such as Hoogvliet in the Netherlands. These cities were erected based on the ideas of the garden city, and a hierarchical ordering and zoning of functions relying on modernist urban planning. Starting in the London region in the 1940s, these New Towns soon became the panacea for urban growth in western Europe. Harder to understand is how the same modernist urban planning started to pop up and spread in developing, decolonizing countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The export of New Town principles can only be understood against the background of the Cold War period, in which the East and West were both competing for the loyalty of the Third World however they could. While the endeavours of the Soviet Union in this field remain largely unresearched, it is clear that the US sent out a number of urban planners and architects to countries in strategic places such as the Middle East. The hypothesis soon formed that urban planning was considered to be a powerful instrument in Cold War politics, and that the export of architecture and planning functioned as a means of cultural instead of political colonization.

A vivid illustration of this hypothesis is provided by the fascinating coalition of two parties, the Greek planner Constantinos Doxiadis and the American Ford Foundation, who together formed a powerful duo of vision and money. They had an intense relationship with lasting consequences for developing countries in the Middle East and Africa. Their cooperation shows how the so-called "neutral" introduction of large scale urban planning was anything but neutral. In fact, it was heavy with promises of freedom, democracy, and prosperity, and laden with ideals of community and emancipation.

The cultural Cold War



In the polarized atmosphere of the period, there wasn't a single American institution not cooperating in the "war on communism": the State Department, the CIA, the United Nations, the Rockefeller, Ford, and Carnegie Foundations, MIT, Rice and Harvard Universities all played a role in the cultural Cold War. It has recently been my job as amateur detective to unravel these intricate networks by interviewing people and going through dusty correspondence and faded microfilms.

Introducing Doxiadis: nicknamed Dinos by his friends at the Ford Foundation, Doxiadis developed an extremely hermetic and theoretical system of design and engineering called "Ekistics", the science of human settlements. It was a rational and scientific alternative to existing historical cities with their congestion of cars and people. Instead, Doxiadis proposed his gridiron cities, which would provide for a human-scaled environment and at the same time facilitate unlimited growth in people, money, cars, and so on. In that sense, they were extremely well suited to development of any kind. Doxiadis was possibly the leading exponent of the explicit application of modernist planning and design as vehicles for freedom, peace, and progress according to a Western model.

His political talents allowed him to form an impressive international network with many US and UN officials, enabling him to design and built an oeuvre his colleagues could only envy. He probably constructed more urban substance than all his CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne) colleagues together. In fact, when CIAM ended, he set up a conglomerate of training and research organizations, including the Delosconferences, which were clearly meant to take over where CIAM left off. He designed and built new cities all over the world: in Ghana, Zambia, Sudan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Iraq, and the US.

How was it possible that this one office built so many large-scale cities around the world while the most eminent urban planners failed? For instance: Sert was never able to realize any of his South American plans; Le Corbusier had to satisfy himself with only one, albeit heroic, new town: Chandigargh. Obviously, Doxiadis was able to build this empire not only by virtue of his phenomenal charisma or the qualities of his work, but most of all because of the American support he received.

A sinister connection

Introducing the Ford Foundation: a private foundation erected in the 1930s by Henry Ford himself, the Ford Foundation was remodelled in 1950 to extend its activities outside the US. Its main goals were formulated under the leadership of Paul Hoffman, formerly the coordinator of the Marshall Plan in Europe. It was in that capacity that Hoffman befriended Doxiadis, who, allegedly using his last dime to show Hoffmann Greek hospitality, threw a party in Athens with a semi-authentic group of Greek dancers. This proved to be money well spent. Hoffmann led the Ford Foundation on an ambitious quest for world peace, aiming to better the world by educating the ignorant, increasing their so-called "intellectual capacity and individual judgement", and easing them into democratic Western civilization. They tried to reach these noble goals mostly by investing in educational institutions — including building schools — and modernization programmes in agriculture. Though urban planning was definitely not a main priority, the Ford Foundation spent five million dollars on Doxiadis's design and research, the largest sum it ever spent on one private party. Starting with a grant to Doxiadis's design work for the city of Karachi in

Pakistan in the mid-1950s, Doxiadis and the Ford Foundation became a truly close couple.

Via the Ford Foundation, Doxiadis was also immersed in the larger network connected to the Foundation. This had strong ties with official US foreign policy, which became visible in the exchange of board members between the Foundation, the US business world, and Washington. Prestigious universities such as Harvard and MIT were working in close relation to both the Ford Foundation and the US foreign office. They contributed mostly in terms of research and advice, and thereby assisted the Ford Foundation to effectively direct its grants. Research at these centres, for instance the Harvard/MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies, received millions of dollars in sponsorship from the Ford Foundation. Thus a constant feedback process was organized in which information, interests, and funding were exchanged between Harvard, the Ford Foundation, and the government. There was complete consensus among the American elite to create peace and order in the world and it was seen as completely logical that private and governmental policies would mutually enhance and strengthen each other.

Still, this doesn't explain why particularly the work of Doxiadis — and not Sert, or Gropius — was judged to fit so well into this consensus. What qualities did the Ford Foundation detect in Doxiadis's planning that caused them to see Ekistics as a useful instrument in their cultural Cold War policies and what political goals did they attach to his urban planning?

The answer probably lies in the highly rational character of Ekistics and the way Doxiadis promoted his work as a science. He presented the outcome of his studies and designs in grids, charts, diagrams, and schemes, almost like the work of a human computer, completely objectified, with no aesthetics or personal choices. In this pre-computer era, there was no way to resemble more closely work created by a computer. Doxiadis was definitely no whimsical arty architect with crayons. He was a trustworthy engineer that could deliver. Ekistics was a visionary, but nonetheless scientific system, in which local data were entered and the design solution followed automatically. A touch of local landscape and architecture was inevitable and necessary, but not too much, since this was contradictory with the universal pretensions of Ekistics.

This objective and rational approach fitted perfectly the philosophy of the Ford Foundation, which formulated its goal as the education of non-Western people into rational and sensible peoples, thereby eliminating mistrust and latent violence. In fact, the Foundation exported with this goal one of the most fundamental values of the US, as the eminent Cold War professor Od Arne Westad has analyzed in his recent publication *The Global Cold War*. As the core values of the US, he singled out liberty, anti-collectivism, a reluctance to accept centralized political power, and an absolute belief in science and technology as the progenitor of "rational action". The American elite were convinced "that liberty was not for everyone, but for those who, through property and education, possessed the necessary independence to be citizens of a republic". So: civilization equals rationality. It was the task of the Americans to raise other peoples into a state of civilization. When turning to urban planning, it would have been hard to find an urban planning theory more rational than Ekistics.

But, as Westad explains, the US was facing a terrible dilemma. On the one hand, it was clear that: "American symbols and images — the free market, anti-Communism, fear of state power, faith in technology — had *teleological*

functions: what is America today will be the world tomorrow." On the other hand, the question was what means a democratic republic could ethically allow itself to use in order to influence other nations — a question that is still relevant. This is where the sometimes far-fetched or ambiguous aid programmes and the intricate networks between government and NGOs come in handy. It is a way to exert control, not with the forceful instruments that an old-fashioned empire would use, but in the non-committal style of a free democratic republic.

The CIA and the European art scene

Sometimes, this went so far that control was exercised through covert operations. A clue to this came when I was asked on two separate occasions to look into CIA-related issues. One question was put very bluntly: was Doxiadis a spy for the CIA? The other question was about a sculpture of Naum Gabo in Rotterdam. It is an abstract metal sculpture, standing on a prominent spot in the busiest shopping street of the city, right in front of a 1950s store designed by Marcel Breuer. I was assured that this statue was paid for by the CIA.

At first, I thought it highly unlikely that the CIA would bother to get involved in subsidizing artworks in the most pro-American city of the Netherlands. But it proved to be true that the CIA was almost certainly involved in manipulating the visual arts scene in western Europe. Frances Saunders (1999) explains how the CIA perceived an inherent danger in the traditionally Leftist European art world, and feared they might go over to the communist ideology. The CIA was convinced that in order to safeguard European culture, it was of the greatest necessity to win over the cultural and intellectual elite, since they would be the ones in charge of the future. To this end, a *Kulturkampf* started immediately after the war amidst the rubble of postwar Berlin, with both Soviet and Allied sides competing in a frenzy of concerts, recitals, film viewings, and art exhibitions.

Architecture was also involved: the well-known publication *Built in the USA*, published in 1952 by the Museum of Modern Arts, was among the translations published by the Psychological Warfare Division of the American Military Government to showcase developments in postwar architecture in the US. It was received enthusiastically and turned out to be very influential in many western European countries; it was on the shelf of every modern architect in the Netherlands.

Pollock and American values

Cultural manipulation was institutionalized in 1950 when the CIA set up the Congress for Cultural Freedom, just a few years after the Truman Doctrine and the launch of the Marshall Plan. Together, they formed a parallel set of political, economic, and cultural measures to prevent Europe from slipping to "the other side". The mission of the Congress for Cultural Freedom was "to nudge the intelligentsia of western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism towards a view more accommodating of 'the American way'". It was a "battle for men's minds", fought by the Congress with the help of an assorted group of radicals and artists, most of them disappointed in Stalin's USSR. They were musicians, writers, painters, actors and included well-known figures such as George Orwell, Jean Paul Sartre, and Jackson Pollock. The Congress for Cultural Freedom organized an impressive cultural offensive, publishing magazines in many different countries and languages, all over Europe and the Third World, organizing a tide of exhibitions of American

painters (many in cooperation with MoMa), concerts, and conferences.

The position of Jackson Pollock and his fellow Abstract Expressionists is especially fascinating: they were adopted by the Congress for Cultural Freedom as the new cultural mascot of the US, much against the grain of prevailing taste in western Europe. But to the Congress, the Abstract Expressionists embodied all the virtues needed in an arts movement to project a new image of America to old Europe; an image that would convincingly counter the stereotypical idea of Americans as "culturally barren, a nation of gum-chewing, Chevy-driving philistines" and would present American culture as vital and superior to Soviet culture.

To the American elite, Pollock's painting radiated the ideology of freedom, of free enterprise. It was non-figurative and politically silent — the very antithesis of socialist realism. Pollock was new, active, and energetic, while socialist realist art was rigid and aped historical styles. Abstract expressionism was seen as a specifically American invention conquering the world, replacing the old centre of the arts — Paris — with New York. Pollock was exactly the right character to oppose the boy-scout Soviet painters, who obediently portrayed collective communist values. Pollock was a real, manly, rough American, and a drunk moreover, characteristics regarded as proper to an artistic figurehead.

Again, the Ford Foundation was very close to the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The number of personal connections and personnel changes between the organizations are so manifold that the Congress could rightly be called a sister organization of the Ford Foundation. Over the years, the Ford Foundation donated almost ten million dollars to the Congress and eventually even became its main financier.

To return to Doxiadis and urban planning: architecture and urban issues were not a priority for the Congress for Cultural Freedom and Doxiadis was among the very few architects involved in its activities. In their important 1955 conference in Milan, he was among the lecturers, where he spoke about the "Economic progress in underdeveloped countries and the rivalry of democratic and communist methods". In 1960, he was a member of the select group that attended the conference on the New Arab Metropolis, together with Hassan Fathy, then a member of his office. These conferences were initiated by the CIA and paid for by the Ford Foundation. Of course, Doxiadis's involvement with the Congress does not prove he was a CIA agent, but it does allude to a hypothesis on the meaning of his work for the CIA and the Ford Foundation that would explain their strong preference for Doxiadis's work.

I'm using the CIA and the Ford Foundation almost as interchangeable institutions, because they operated from exactly the same mindset. At the risk of proposing what sounds like a paranoid conspiracy theory, I suggest that the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the Ford Foundation, the US government, the Ivy League Universities, as well as other private bodies such as the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations, all worked together in "the war on Communism", to paraphrase a contemporary term. They would divide tasks among themselves: whenever a certain activity didn't fit the programme of the Ford Foundation, the director of the Congress would be called up and he would finance or organize it. The CIA would drop in on the Ford Foundation weekly to discuss their own plans and delegate them to Foundation officials. This period has been described by most people involved as a very passionate time, an exiting amalgam of covert operations, boudoir politics, spontaneous action, lots of

travel, pretension, and money, and especially: no doubt that all this was completely justified, useful, and ethical. A beautiful, high-minded episode, which everyone loved being part of. They felt they were "the most privileged of men, participants in a drama such as rarely occurs even in the long life of a great nation". One can't help feeling envious.

A new theory of planning

To these men, Doxiadis was as much a mascot in the field of urban planning as Jackson Pollock was in art. Whereas Pollock was the antidote to socialist realist painting, the work of Doxiadis posed the complete opposite to socialist realist urban planning and architecture. Postwar Soviet cities, up to the arrival of Khrushchev at the end of the 1950s, bore the strong mark of Stalinist planning. Up to a thousand New Towns were built all over the vast country, using a well-known historical repertoire both in urban planning and in architecture. The vista, the axis, the square, the closed housing block, the monumental, palazzo-inspired architecture all evoked an urban image aspiring to be recognizable and familiar to the common people.

While Pollock proposed a completely new direction in painting, and freed himself from historical precedents and iconography, Doxiadis's Ekistics posed a completely new system in urban planning, freeing it from formal design and replacing it by organizing the urban area in ever-expanding grids and systems, eliminating monumental composition and replacing it with schemes for unlimited growth and change. His Dynapolis and eventually Ecumenopolis, the world-encompassing city, exploded all known scales in urban planning. The neighbourhood unit, known from the English New Towns, was stretched and repeated and put in an endless grid, until every reference to existing urban settings had vanished. Ideologically important was the fact that the state-imposed collectivism of social-realist planning was replaced by the emphasis on bottom-up communities. Moreover, ideas of change and growth without boundaries and technology solving every possible problem, from demographic growth to energy shortage, from pollution to economic backwardness to ethnic and social unrest, all made Doxiadis's vision the perfect vehicle of the ideology of US development.

The Ford Foundation described its urban planning projects (in India, Yugoslavia, Chile, and Pakistan) as "white bread": soft, with no particular taste, and liked by everybody. They could ease the way towards a different lifestyle — Western, efficient, and peaceful — and help Third World countries become rational civilizations and obtain well-deserved autonomy. In this sense, it is not an exaggeration to call Doxiadis' work part of the cultural and economic imperialism of the West in the developing countries.

Planning in the Middle East

The Middle East, located right below the soft underbelly of the USSR and therefore a main stage for Cold War activities, was virtually a playground for American architects in the 1950s. They followed in the wake of American and international aid programmes such as the Point Four Programme and the United Nations Development Decade. They were hired by the puppet regimes installed by the British-American "coalition".

In Iran, ruled at the time by Shah Reza Pahlavi, Victor Gruen designed a master plan for the capital Tehran and numerous American offices flooded the country to work on New Towns. The Iraqi regime of King Faisal hired Walter

Gropius, Le Corbusier, Gio Ponti, Alvar Aalto, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Again, there's a Harvard connection here: this select group of foreign architects was invited by a married couple of Iraqi Harvard graduates, former students of Walter Gropius and immediately related to the prime minister.

The American aid programmes focused on Lebanon, Iraq, or Iran often underestimated the complexities of the countries. Without speaking the language, with insufficient knowledge about the local social customs, these well-intentioned but amateur efforts often missed the target. In Iran, a group of five American planners took up the challenge. When they arrived in 1957, they found out, to their disgust and disappointment, that the cities were not exactly metropolitan, had no comfortable means of transport, no services, no shopping, no education, and so on. They had the greatest trouble interacting with local officials, there were permanent issues of hierarchy, and there was frustration about lack of cooperation and lack of almost everything else. The most enthusiastic planner, working in the Kurdish city Sanandaj in western Iran, finally succeeded in setting up a small planning department along Western lines, complete with an office and drawing boards. But he returned from a two-week honeymoon to find that the office had been wrecked by a storm and that his newly trained planners had disappeared. In short, there was an unbridgeable gap between the Western, rational planning methods the Americans longed to impose and existing local traditions and habits.

Compared to these rather naive efforts, what came out of Doxiadis's office was of the utmost efficiency and effectiveness. Especially in Iraq, where he was hired to design a modern national housing programme including the capital Baghdad, Doxiadis showed what he was capable of: practically on his own he introduced a complete ministry of housing, planning, architecture, and architecture training. Gropius's office was struggling to get the designs for the Baghdad University built, and only succeeded in realizing one tower twenty years later; Frank Lloyd Wright saw his grandiose plans for the Baghdad Opera thrown out the window when the revolutionary regime took over from King Faisal in 1958. But Doxiadis had no problems: his multidisciplinary team made surveys, wrote reports, designed tens of thousands of houses, and was able to build them too. Nevertheless, official architectural history has shown a disproportionate interest in the failed designs of high profile architects and neglected the far more influential work of Doxiadis.

Unknowingly, everybody has seen the results of his work on CNN. By the end of the 1950s, Doxiadis built areas in Iraqi towns which bear the now well-known names of Mosul, Basra, and Kirkuk. The largest number of houses was realized in Baghdad, on the east bank of the Tigris; the endless repetition of square neighbourhood units are easily recognizable on any satellite image. This is the area called Sadr City. By now it is mostly known as a nightmarish ghetto and the gruesome backdrop for war footage. The area has been a hotbed of resistance against the Americans, inhabited by two million mostly Shia Iraqis. It consists of vast areas of low-rise but high-density development, with narrow alleys and cul-de-sacs, grey concrete slums and small row houses. Sadr City even has the dubious honour of being featured in a computer game on the Internet called *Kuma War: Mission 16, Battle in Sadr City*.

Planning as political strategy

Sadr City was designed by Doxiadis as part of his 1958 masterplan for Baghdad. Doxiadis's design follows the Ekistics rules and is almost identical to

his other contemporary urban designs, be it Islamabad, Tema, or Khartoum. Doxiadis encased the historical centre of Baghdad in an orthogonal grid extending on both sides of the Tigris/Euphrates, composed of 40 sectors of some two square kilometres each, separated from each other by wide thoroughfares. Each sector was subdivided into a number of 'communities', with smaller neighbourhood centres and housing areas served by a network of cul-de-sacs. Each community centre consisted of a modernist composition of market buildings, public services, and a mosque. The row housing was organized in such a way that the smallest communities each had a "gossip square", an intimate open meeting space inspired by existing local Iraqi customs. Though these small oases could be interpreted as contextual elements, as a whole, the extension of Baghdad was a generic, universal system Doxiadis thought appropriate for almost any developing city with a hot climate. The architecture itself was also generic, with some local touches: a restrained modernism with decorated panels in a pattern slightly reminiscent of Arab motives, built with local materials, but not in any outspoken vernacular. Local influence had a very limited, technical meaning for Doxiadis: it meant using local techniques and building methods, but did not involve using local identity or cultural traditions.

The most appealing feature of Doxiadis's plans for his American patrons and the Ford Foundation in particular was the emphasis on community building. Something that was to be avoided at all costs was that the cities should have an alienating effect on the millions who were often the first in their families to lead a modern urban lifestyle. After all, alienation would lead the population to turn in frustration to communism or to revert to archaic traditions of superstition and violence. We could therefore regard the cities designed by Doxiadis with their small-scale urban design of gossip squares, little streets, and community centres, as finely-tuned "emancipation machines". This emancipation was part of the modernization package, which included democratic institution building and free-market economic reforms.

In retrospect, one thing is certain: the urban planning projects in Iraq, Iran, or Pakistan did not have the effect the Americans had hoped for: a stable democratic mentality that would secure the way for Western foreign policy. The inherent suggestion that a plan with an open layout, symbolic of an open society, would help accomplish this in real terms has not been successful. It does go to show, however, how high expectations once were of what urban planning could accomplish.

A signal failure

It is tempting to compare the present situation in Iraq with the Cold War episode. Again, the US has attempted to impose its own ideas on Iraq — this time, as Naomi Klein has analyzed, the neoconservative idea of the free-market economy. Even officials who were part of the American policy making in the 1950s, such as the eminent professor of history William Polk, now issue warnings not to make the same mistake twice: of imposing structures, ideas, organizations and plans that are not wanted and not indigenous to the local culture. As Polk has simply and truly stated: it is not only the US that wants to determine its own destiny. We could add: it is not only the US that wants to determine its own architecture. Architecture and urban planning are not "white bread" as the Ford Foundation stated, they are not technical works with no inherent meaning or taste; on the contrary, by their organization they project a strong ideal image of a specific kind of society. But however you judge Doxiadis' cities and however critical you might be, there

was at least an ideal behind it; at the present moment it would be very difficult to find any positive images of the future Iraq.

It may seem extremely ill-judged to compare Baghdad with the European New Towns, of which the problems and circumstances are of a totally different nature. However, there is one obvious parallel: in Europe, too, there was a cultural and political mission hidden somewhere in the technocratic project of the industrialized and standardized city — the idea that these New Towns could function as instruments of emancipation and modernization. In Europe, like in Baghdad, the open design had an extra meaning: to shape the minds of the inhabitants, to open their minds to the free, democratic society. And in Europe, too, these ideals have not turned out as planned. While that may be true, one thing is clear: the present day situation in which everybody in the architects and planning community agrees that the postwar cities have been a complete failure, has only led to a set of non-productive strategies. In academia, there is a tendency to study postwar modernist planning and original concepts to the point of obsession even.

Our modernist heritage

Minutes of the few CIAM meetings have produced libraries—full of analytical literature; the unrealized designs of Sert, Le Corbusier, or Kahn are still unravelled as if they were the Dead Sea scrolls. But studies such as these tend to banish modernist architecture and planning to a distant era, almost forgetting that there are real cities out there, with real people in them, that one can visit and walk around in, and that have problems to be solved.

Practising architects and planners, on the other hand, have either completely ignored the existence of the not-so-sexy and glamorous New Towns or they have clung to the *tabula rasa* approach of erasing them and starting anew. This can hardly be the proper solution: the postwar urban substance is simply too big, there are too many people living there, and starting all over again creates the same problem all over again. The problem of the deteriorating postwar areas cries out for creative urban planning, research, and design, which re-uses the existing material, both in its physical and social sense.

And it doesn't really matter if we talk about Baghdad or Hoogvliet: both are part of the same twentieth-century heritage we have to deal with — even the bottom line of the moral questions is the same. **WiMBY!** has made the statement in Hoogvliet that the values inherent in the modern planning — democracy, the collective, emancipation — are still relevant, even though their architectural forms may change. Other cities come up with different positions. Whenever a city in the Netherlands or Denmark is restructured, it makes a lot of sense to study the social organizations that have uplifted the neighbourhood of 23 Enero in Caracas, Venezuela, or Indian cities where inhabitants have appropriated their modernist housing blocks by decorating them in a horror vacui of personalized symbols and signs. On the other hand, projects developed in the restructuring of European cities might well be an instrument to be used in the rebuilding of Islamabad or Baghdad. It is necessary that the legacy of modernist urban planning is reconsidered, that all these visions of its future are made known and exchangeable, and that the New Towns are treated as what they are: real cities not be erased, but waiting for a serious design strategy that will add another layer of urban material, and turn them into normal, growing, developing, aging cities.

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