

Baltimore: Open City
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I have come to believe that humanity's greatest strength and its greatest weakness are one in the same: it is our ability to connect the dots and to draw conclusions. The human brain is unique in its ability to analyze and understand the world around it and to order information in a way that makes sense, developing along the way a philosophy of existence.

This intellectual process is intimately tied to observation. Humans are inherently experiential mammals and until we go through something directly, we can only try our best to grasp it. Our childhood fantasies of falling in love are likely different from the actual experience of feeling romantic love for the first time. Our idea of marriage rarely matches the truth of being married. As an expectant mother, parents constantly tell me: "Just wait. You have no idea what you're in for." And they are right, I don't. I can only imagine.

We all understand the world through our limited experiences and over time, our limbic brain creates a kind of roadmap to living, a set of values and assumptions that filter our way of seeing. Neuroscientists call this path dependence. We frequently base the future on what we know and understand of the past and these heuristic biases influence our decision making, whether consciously or unconsciously. This means that we tend repeat ourselves.

Take public housing in America as an example. Executed primarily by those who never directly experienced living in such housing, the experiments of the past resulted in a guessing game of what might work best. We tore down houses and rowhouses to build apartment towers. A few decades later we tore down those towers and replaced them with what had been there before: houses. In her seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs notes that those outside the community attempting to "fix" the perceived chaos within via different housing models just weren't seeing the truth. "There is a quality meaner than outright ugliness or disorder, and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served," she writes.

At present, the human mind cannot fully comprehend where the American city is heading. Many of our experiences from the past—economic, ecological, social, cultural—have shifted as we embark on a new era of urbanity. Cities like Baltimore and Detroit will simply never be what they once were and yet, we frequently apply the same processes, the same architecture, the same public policy to this unknown scenario rather than embrace the beauty and potential of exploration and invention. This is terra incognita and we must treat it as such.

It's high time we challenge our path dependent thinking about cities and strive to connect the dots in new ways. We can begin by developing tools for communication and collaboration among designers, residents, policymakers, etc. that allow us to supplement our own experience and understanding with the perspectives of others in order to develop a new architecture for urban living. It is time, in other words, to stop looking to the formulas of the past and embrace the truth of what is in front of us: a new order that is struggling to exist and to be served.