

The miracles of Curitiba



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MIRACLES happen even where cities are concerned. Cities that are condemned with the excesses of urban ills can come around and show that "the city is not a problem but a solution." Such a city is Curitiba, located fifty miles off the coast in the south of Brazil, that has earned an international reputation for being a model city. Without the miracles, Curitiba probably would have been like many cities in the world afflicted by the usual urban ills: poverty, poor quality of life and a general hopelessness. Here is a good story about cities.

Jaime Lerner is the president of the International Union of Architects (UIA). Lerner is trained as an architect and his current position is a prestigious one, but his claim to fame is being the mayor of Curitiba for nearly thirty years. He was also two-term governor of the state of Paraná, where he promoted the greatest economic and social transformation in its history consolidating its position as the new industrial hub of Brazil. What he has done for the region and its capital city Curitiba is nothing short of a miracle. I do not know of any other city, and I do not know of any other urban leader who has achieved that. (Incidentally, as president of UIA, Lerner wrote to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh last August with concern for the mutilation of the Capital Complex by unwarranted buildings, but as we know that is not one happy story).

Lerner was speaking recently in Honolulu to a gathering of policy makers, architects and planners at an

event hosted by the Mayor of Honolulu, Jeremy Harris. He was specially invited by Mayor Harris to bring a new enthusiasm for a sustainable and humane city design for the city of Honolulu. Jaime Lerner opened his lecture by declaring: "The city is not a problem but a solution." If anyone else had said that, no matter how involved in the making and planning of cities, it would have sounded incredibly hollow and rhetorical. But not with Jaime Lerner, for he has already become an international legend, someone who can turn urban hopelessness into inspiration, and that considering the complexity of a city is a miracle. But the truth is there is no such thing as miracles with acuity; it needs the visionary stance of leadership, and a political will and passion to make that possible. Lerner combines all that.

Lerner is convinced that the future is in cities, and that cities can be the most beautiful collective dream. He rejects the pessimistic and tragic projections of urban life that usually cite the horrors of cities like Mexico City and Mumbai. Lerner uses a simple rationale: "When you project tragedy, you will have tragedy." Curitiba is the proof that the idea of a city as a collective dream can be realised.

So what about Curitiba? In terms of its location, population and urban conditions, Curitiba is no different from many Latin American cities. Curitiba has trebled in size in just 25 years and now has a population of 1.6 million. It has a high squatter settlement where fewer than half the population is literate. And there used to be the usual problems of slums, economic down swing, garbage, sewage, etc. But now after thirty years of Lerner's sustained innovations, the residents of Curitiba think they live in the best city in the world. The city is now a model having earned many international awards and recognitions. At the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba was chosen among twelve cities by the UN to receive one of its highest awards.

In 1971, Lerner was just a young architect who was concerned for the future of his city, for its environmental and human needs. Not impressed by the practice of borrowing money to

ABOUT CITIES

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A transportation node, Curitiba.

build high-profile projects such as shopping malls, big highways, and other glittery buildings that do little to the overall quality of life of the city, Lerner along with a group of architects produced a new master plan for the city. They approached Curitiba's leaders then, made a case for a better designed city, and were eventually given the mission for transformation.

The mayor of Honolulu, like officials from many other cities, has visited Curitiba to study the new systems and the transformed quality of life there. I have not been to Curitiba, but here is what people are saying (I am citing here information from Donella Meadows' essay in the Whole Earth Review, Spring, 1995):

Parks and gardens as civic spaces

combined with innovative social programmes are the highest priority in Lerner's plans. Curitiba has now 17 new parks, 90 miles of bike paths, and trees everywhere. Lerner provided 1.5 million tree seedlings to neighbourhoods for them to plant and care for, saying that "there is little in the architecture of a city that is more beautifully designed than a tree." He solved the city's flood problems by diverting water from lowlands into lakes in the new parks. The builders of Curitiba get a tax break if their projects include green areas.

The social programmes target urban poor, especially the orphaned or abandoned street children which is an endemic problem all over Brazil. Among some of the programmes

Lerner initiated was to have each industry, shop and institution to "adopt" a few children, providing them with a daily meal and a small wage in exchange for simple maintenance gardening or office chores. Teenagers were hired to keep the new parks clean. The gardens lining the new pedestrian streets are tended by street children.

The management of trash is another important innovation. Curitiba recycles two-thirds of its garbage -- one of the highest rates of any city anywhere. The citizens separate their trash into two categories, organic and inorganic, for pick-up by two kinds of trucks. Poor families in squatter settlements that are unreachable by trucks bring their trash bags to neighbourhood centres, where they can exchange them for bus tickets or for eggs, milk, oranges and potatoes, all bought from outlying farms. Recovered materials are sold to local industries. The recycling programme costs no more than the old landfill, but the city is cleaner, there are more jobs, farmers are supported and the poor get food and transportation.

Lerner converted the shopping district in the city center into a pedestrian zone. Initially he met resistance from the shop-owners but the project became so successful that commerce in other streets demanded the same. Lerner also organised the street vendors into a mobile, open-air fair that circulates through the city's neighbourhoods.

But the most crucial and radical innovation was in the area of transportation (Lerner points out that among the people who can destroy a city are the traffic engineers). "The Master Plan established the guiding principle that mobility and land use can not be disassociated with each other if the city's future design is to succeed. In order to fulfil the goals of the Master Plan in providing access for all citizens, the main transport arteries were modified over time to give public transport the highest priority."

There are five arteries that radiate from the centre city with each containing one two-way lane devoted exclusively to express buses. Establishing exclusive bus lanes on the city's predominant arteries created a safe, reliable, and efficient bus service operating

without the hazards and delays inherent to mixed-traffic bus service. On certain arteries, triple-compartment buses in their own traffic lanes carry three hundred passengers each. They go as fast as subway cars, but at one-eighthieth the construction cost, as Donella Meadows reports.

Lerner himself designed the Plexiglas tube bus stations. There, passengers pay their fares, enter through one end of the tube, and exit from the other end. The system eliminates paying on board, and allows faster loading and unloading, less idling and air pollution, and a sheltered place for waiting.

"Every child should be able to



A bus stop in Curitiba (designed by Jaime Lerner)

draw their city" is what Lerner preaches. It means that you have to have a concept of a city to be able to do something about it. What the story of Lerner tells me is that if urban miracles can happen in Curitiba, miracles can happen anywhere. Lerner installs a faith in what seems like a damning project: transforming a city. Even the mayor of Honolulu, a city that is doing fairly well, invited Lerner to the gathering--I had the privilege of going to--so that he could learn a few more things from his colleague's vision. I was thinking if Honolulu can do that, why not Dhaka? Wishful thinking obviously.

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