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The Politics of *SimCity**

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Years ago, when Robert Caro's magisterial biography of Robert Moses was first published, I remember reading it with mixed emotions. On the one hand, it reinforced every lesson I tried to convey in my course on urban politics. On the other hand, it taught those lessons in a way that was so vivid, and so engaging, that it made my conventional textbooks and lectures seem hopelessly abstract and lifeless. There was only one thing to do: throw out the old texts and make *The Power Broker* (Caro 1975) the centerpiece of the course. I redesigned everything from scratch.

Recently, one of the students in my course on the history of city planning (offered in the University Honors Program at the University of Maryland at College Park) ambled up after class. "Have you ever played *sim city*?" I thought I heard him ask. He set me straight—"*SimCity*"² he said, enunciating carefully—and then offered a demonstration, during which I was reminded of Caro's book. Here we go again, I thought to myself as I purchased the *Windows* version of the simulation.

SimCity, created by Will Wright, is described in the user's manual as a computer simulation that allows you "to design, manage and maintain the city of your dreams" (Bremer 1989, 6). The upgrade, released in 1994, is called *SimCity 2000*. The point of the simulation is to duplicate, by massive and virtually instantaneous numbers crunching, the real world of urban politics in which land-use decisions are taken. As Paul Starr has put it, the "hidden curriculum" of *SimCity* is "the management of complex systems based on 'intelligent scanning' of streams of constantly changing information" (Starr 1994, 25).

SimCity has many virtues, not least of which is that it is fun to play, which may be why many commentators have been impressed

by its pedagogical potential. And most of the problems associated with the original *SimCity* have been successfully addressed by *SimCity 2000*—at least, those that are in principle soluble. Zoning, for example, is far more subtle, allowing for some mixture of uses. You can build bus depots and expressways. You can found a college, a zoo, or a marina. Municipal finance is much more sophisticated, involving the floating of bond issues and requiring the payment of interest. You can legalize gambling, if you like, provided you can get it through city council. You can build a military base, tunnels, elementary schools—even one of Paolo Soleri's "arcologies." You can pass ordinances that address the quality of life in various ways. *SimCity 2000* has its own climate, and weather reports can be monitored in the newspaper, to which you can subscribe: "The different papers (once your city is big enough to have more than one) will have different angles on stories, so you may want to read through more than one" (Bremer 1993, 116).

In sum, to quote a reviewer who admits to being "addicted" to the original game:

SimCity 2000 has enough new features to justify readdiction. Now, time itself becomes a factor: As new technologies, such as desalinization and fusion power, are invented, the tools to use them pop up in your toolbox. The terrain (completely editable) has hills and valleys, and you can zoom into and completely rotate the 3-D model of your city. You have to dig in the dirt to lay pipes and construct subways. Your constituent Sims demand education and health care, and their IQs drop if you don't build enough libraries and museums. If they don't like where you laid the train tracks, the Sims will drive cars; if they don't like your judgment (or lack of it), they'll vote you out of office or move to a neighboring city (Seaman 1994).

SimCity—even the upgraded version—is far from perfect, however.

As Mark Schone has written with reference to *SimCity 2000*, "programming any more real-world variables into the simulation might make it unplayable" (Schone 1994, 50). There continues to be a "bias against mixed use development" (Starr 1994, 20), and the mayor of *SimCity 2000* is still unrealistically omnipotent.

Moreover, there are problems inherent in both versions of the simulation that would be far more difficult to address than any of these, and which may severely limit its pedagogical potential. Of these, I wish to focus on three: *SimCity*'s exaggeration of the role of state planning in urban development; its neglect of one of the most salient features of American urban life—race; and its underestimation of the *social*—as opposed to the *material*—dimensions of city life.

State Planning and Private Development

As Schone has put it, "Wright's toy [i.e., *SimCity*] overstates the importance of urban planners and underplays the role of developers, pressure groups, preservationists, etc." (Schone 1994, 50). The consequence is that *SimCity* teaches the virtues of state planning.

It is undeniable that growth is more orderly when strict controls are placed on private enterprise. In Europe, the New Towns movement³ has guaranteed the success of certain communities, thus allowing them the luxury of early investment in expensive infrastructure. In France, for example, the national government is regulating the growth of Paris by building and developing a number of new towns, each strategically situated with rail links to the historic center (Hall 1977).

In 1980, I visited one of them—Evry New Town, which lies about 25 miles south and east of Paris. At the time the train station seemed completely out of scale—a colossus

in a Lilliputian world. A decade and a half of planned—i.e., state-subsidized—development has since justified the original scale of the project; the new town has grown into its train station the way that a puppy grows into its paws.

Planning ahead *is* in many ways economical. If you know your city will succeed, why not bury the power lines as soon as the site has been cleared from forest or desert, or reclaimed from the sea? Why not just build a nuclear power plant instead of starting with coal? Another case in point—one in which Will Wright might find inspiration—is the Pneumatic Refuse Conveying (P.R.C.) System that has been implemented in several of the new planned communities outside Stockholm (Stockholm Information Board 1976).⁴ Of course, the builders of real American cities have not for the most part had the luxury of burying their power lines or laying track for their light-rail systems at the time when it would have been most economical—at the beginning.

So, looked at one way, the planning bias of *SimCity* renders it inapplicable to the history of urban development in the United States, where the cacophony of private schemes has largely drowned out public plans. But looked at another way, the planning bias of *SimCity* conveys an important lesson: the infrastructure problems our cities have had to deal with result in part from the fact that in the United States the success of particular cities, with few exceptions, has never been guaranteed by the state (although, to be sure, public policy—the FHA, for example, or subsidies for highway construction—counts for a lot).

At all stages of the life cycle, our cities not only have been shaped by private enterprise within, but have been engaged in heated competition with their rivals. Whether one views this as the rigors of capitalism or a mad carnival of roguery, the consequence can be seen everywhere: the American landscape is littered with failed New Jerusalems and Zion Cities, and every Kansas City has its Leavenworth, every Chicago a Superior, Wisconsin

(Glaab and Brown 1983; Reps 1967).

Race and the American City

Mark Schone is surely right to note that the single most curious, and most unrealistic, feature of *SimCity* is the absence of race and ethnicity, which he attributes to Will Wright's wish to "avoid controversy" (Schone 1994, 50)—a profitable instinct for a capitalist. But the result is that the player for whom rich cultural diversity, the economic equality of the races, and no discernible pattern of residential segregation by race or ethnic group is the *sine qua non* of utopia would play *SimCity* in vain. Since the Sims come in only one racial flavor, there can be no map to show the distribution of different races through the city, and no way to correlate race with income; by definition, there can be no race riots among the canned disaster scenarios.⁵

It is hard to say, however, how seriously the absence of race actually impairs *SimCity* as a simulator of urban development. Schone asserts that the racial homogeneity of the Sims means that it is impossible to simulate "inner-city decay," which he characterizes as a function of "white flight" exacerbated by "city-hating suburbanites" and Reaganomics, in which "cities didn't matter" (Schone 1994, 50). Maybe. But the hypothesis built into *SimCity*—in which inner cities can, but will not inevitably, decay—is that when government spends more than it takes in, taxes have to rise, which means that investment declines and the tax base erodes, resulting in increasing joblessness and added pressure on government.

People without choices—meaning people without skills—end up concentrated in those few places where they can afford to dwell; those places become "blighted"—in my version of *SimCity*, blight appears as a rust-colored smudge that spreads like crabgrass. It's a vicious circle, fully accounted for in *SimCity* without any reference to race or racism. In this respect,

SimCity may be politically incorrect; significantly, Schone observes that at some point in the 1970s causal modeling was abandoned by the planning profession: "they didn't like what the sophisticated models told them" (Schone 1994, 50).

The Social and Material Dimensions of City Life

My hunch is that many professional city planners, and probably many scholars as well, came to urban studies out of an interest in architecture and with more or less well developed aesthetic sensibilities. For most of us, utopian yearnings manifest themselves in visions of buildings—buildings and people (Fishman 1977). A city exists in space, it is three-dimensional, and it is a social work of art. To be sure, Plato is persuasive when he demonstrates that building a city—if only mentally, or linguistically—requires asking about the meaning of justice and the good, and it probably means posing many other questions that probably never would occur to an engineer, or to those city planners, in the tradition of Hippodamos, who are obsessed with physical form. But for most of us, any ideal city we might conjure up in our fevered imagination—Eutopia, Amaurote, Erewhon, or Broadacre City—is conceived as a built environment, much more so than as a set of laws or socioeconomic structures.

The power of these architectonic visions is such that we are easily led to believe that judgments about cities, and about whether they are good or bad places to live, are essentially aesthetic. I, for one, would not dispute the assertion that Imperial Rome and Renaissance Florence were beautiful cities. That the former should have produced Caligula, and the latter Savonarola, reminds us that grandeur can mask depravity. To anyone who would suggest that in the post-modern age we have outgrown simple-minded architectural determinism—the "edifice complex" of the City Beautiful movement, for example—I would cite the hoopla of re-



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Of course, it is not always so easy to infer the meaning of these events from architectural evidence—and that is particularly so in the case of ancient or remote civilizations. Nor will it be easy for our descendants to “read” our civilization from our archaeological detritus—styrofoam and all. The point has been made famously, and hilariously, in *Motel of the Mysteries* (Macaulay 1979).

SimCity, whatever its virtues, reinforces the idea that a city essentially is a physical thing, a *built* environment where people pursue their private interests, rather than a community formed around a shared conception of the common good. No version of *SimCity*, no matter how refined, will ever be able to depict Sparta, or to explain why it had no need of walls, let alone represent the medieval city, the virtues of which were largely ethereal, and the physical properties vestigial.⁸ Mumford, who considered ancient Rome utterly depraved, nevertheless was willing to concede that “when the worst has been said about urban Rome, one further word must be added: to the end men loved her” (Mumford 1961, 238). It is hard to imagine how any computer game, no matter how sophisticated, can hope to teach such lessons.

Notes

* A version of this paper was delivered at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, The New York Hilton, September 1–4.

1. Thanks are due Eric Spross, who helped me in a number of ways.

2. *SimCity* is the product of a California software firm called Maxis. Approximately two and a half million copies have been sold to date.

3. Lewis Mumford considered the post-World War II New Towns movement to be the last best hope of mankind: “The very existence of the New Towns of England and Sweden, though they have not yet altered the dominant metropolitan pattern, still bears witness to the possibility of a different mode of urban growth. That small sign may be the harbinger of a larger transformation” (Mumford 1961, 528).

4. Refuse is conveyed through large-bore steel pipes by an air current travelling at about 20–25 meters per second.

5. Although it is worth noting that in *SimCity 2000* there are riots caused by “heat,

cent years equating the Inner Harbor with the success of Baltimore,⁶ or suggesting that a new ballpark will be the catalyst for the rebirth of postindustrial Cleveland. There are not a few among us who, despite Jane Jacobs’s (1961) powerful indictment of “Radiant Garden City Beautiful” three decades ago, still believe that a city *is* its skyline.⁷

Cities are more than just bricks and mortar, and they are more than just bricks and mortar over time. Lewis Mumford made this point brilliantly in his treatment of the medieval city, which was, he contended, “above all things, in its busy turbulent life, a stage for the ceremonies of the Church” (Mumford 1961, 277). One might make

essentially the same point—*mutatis mutandis*—about the modern American city. In a review of John Brinckerhoff Jackson’s most recent book, for example, Witold Rybczynski reminds us that our sense of place, our

actual sense of physical belonging, is not mainly conditioned by architecture and urban design but by shared daily, weekly, or seasonal events, that is, by a sense of time. . . . Spaces are identified not so much by their physical features as by the events that take—and took—place in them. One might say, following Jackson, that the homecoming game matters more than the stadium, the parade more than the street, the fair more than the fairground (Rybczynski 1994, 32–33).

crime and unemployment," or by long power blackouts (Bremer 1993, 122).

6. Consider the following account:

I have recently had a chance to see what has been done in the way of revitalization in such cities as Dallas and Houston and Denver and Oklahoma City and Memphis and even Little Rock. I had the feeling that this expensive facelifting affected the rest of the city very little. Architecture buffs enjoy the results, and so do tourists, but if you are a resident of the city or merely on your way to work, you see the display in a different light (Jackson 1994, 152).

7. Then again, skylines are not uninteresting. See, for example, Kostof 1991, chapter 5.

8. It has been observed that with the demise of the ancient world went a loss of citizenship, for which people were compensated by, in effect, growing souls. In *The City in History*, Mumford makes a similar point when he argues that the Christian monastery was "a new kind of polis", and that the monastery revived the ancient polis, but an "etherialized" polis in which physical form was of little consequence (Mumford 1961, 246).

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