

“Comments on Suburbanization”

Introductory remarks from Hashim Sarkis, Dean of the MIT School of Architecture and Planning, at the Future of Suburbia Conference, hosted at the MIT Norman B. Leventhal Center for Advanced Urbanism (LCAU).

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In a not-so-distant future, when the current conditions of urbanization would reach their inevitable hilt, the world would eventually become one continuous form of settlement, an ecumenos of sorts. When this happens, and it will probably will, the fabric of this city world will not be made out of highrises and downtowns. It will look like an endless suburb. Consequently, we would have to reverse the hierarchy of what is urb, and what is surb-urb.

This ecumenal reorganization is not a new phenomenon. We have experienced it in the post-WWII expansion of cities, at the turn of the 19th century city with industrialization, and many times before. After the 2nd century, Rome the model metropolis, ceased to be a city and became empire. The Roman road and water systems took over the forum and basilica as the organizing elements of settlements and the townhouse gave way to the country house as the ideal of dwelling.

There is no doubt that the scale and impact and patterns of the coming suburbanization as unique. What we are here to do today is to anticipate the impact of shifting coordinates, to study the fabric of the future city world, to understand its challenges as they emerge and to imagine its civic and design potentials.

This undertaking, this event represents what is best about the Center for Advanced Urbanism, bringing MIT faculty and experts in the field together to think about topics ahead, to generate research and debate, and to disseminate it to the world in the form of publications and ideas, both radical and practical, but also with a clear sense of the civic role that design could play.

If the Center for Advanced Urbanism did not exist when I started at MIT two months ago, I would have worked hard to create it. But I am very happy that this, the brainchild of Adele Santos and the heads of architecture and urban planning, has been in gestation, and under the leadership of Alexander d’Hooghe and now Alan Berger, it is thriving and making significant strides two years into its hopefully long and prosperous life. There is nothing like it in the world. All the other research centers about urbanism tend to be either too narrow to address the complexity of the urban situation or too small to be able to take on the range of activities that the center is taking on. They also tend to be either

enmeshed in addressing immediate problems or withdrawn from the urban transformations ahead. What the Center provides is both breadth and depth, long term thinking and short term application. Most importantly, it operates with the ethical civic mindedness of its pilot sponsors, Norman and Alan Leventhal.