A comparative tale of two cities in search of sustainability: London and Seattle

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Abstract

All cities can learn a great deal by comparing various urban growth paradigms and resultant planning strategies. This comparative tale will explore the contemporary dynamics of two cities: Seattle, Washington, USA and London, England, UK. This probing tale is in part motivated by Dickens’ classic A Tale of Two Cities and his eloquent expression of the best and worst of times. Today, this is a parallel dialectic as we search for sustainable urbanism over auto driven sprawl.

Seattle’s story is revealed in a probing study entitled “The Pierce Report.” It explored issues common to most cities and concludes, “We can work towards a dream or let the nightmare happen.” This report motivated a proactive study called the Vision 2020 program that generated an analysis of five urban growth scenarios. The alternatives were analyzed as to their social, economical and environmental impacts upon this beautiful region in the Pacific Northwest. The public participated in an elaborate review and voted on what alternative they considered to be the best in fulfilling their vision for a sustainable future. This contemporary study recommended planning strategies that were implemented in London in 1946 (urban and regional planning with clustered growth in new and old towns within a conservation zone). In the 1980’s, London has dissolved these programs and has encouraged free market developments that have caused many of Seattle’s challenging problems.

Currently, the pendulum has shifted once again. Free market forces are compromising Seattle’s promising future, whereas London’s contemporary housing policy forcefully embraces sustainable directives. The paper will explore this dynamic tale of two cities, comparing their urban growth alternatives as they shift to and from a free market to a more sustainable paradigm – important lessons from the past as society plans for the future.
Introduction

This exploration of two contemporary cities is, in part, motivated by Charles Dickens’ classic *A Tale of Two Cities*. This probing tale was written some 150 years ago about two societies over 200 years ago. Let us ponder his eloquent introductory words which sets the premise for this challenging dialectic between the best and worst of urbanism. Dickens begins his amazing tale by stating [1]:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we have nothing before us … in short, the period was so far like the present, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on it’s being received, for good or evil … comparison only.

Dickens’ probing tale challenges us to continually evaluate our contemporary ways, how we can resolve our own challenging dialectics between rich and poor, the wisdom or foolishness of consuming finite resources, and the effective use of our enlightened creativity or destructive greed. This paper will explore a contemporary tale of two cities by exploring the social, economic and environmental (SEE) implications of their progressive and regressive growth strategies – those generated by design and the others by free market dynamics. By definition, the SEE variables (social equity, environmental quality and economic parity) are fundamental aspects to a sustainable future.

This essay is a general tale derived from more detailed comparative studies of the SEE variables – most notable are the numerous studies on the cost of sprawl, the author’s collaborative work on comparing urban alternatives in the US & UK and a sustainable plan for Pullman, Washington, USA. The Pullman plan was based upon a detailed study of key ecological variables, analyzing and balancing on-site cycles of air, water, food, fiber, and energy – fundamental human-environmental variables for achieving sustainability. This collaborative study received a gold medal at the UN Habitat Conference in Istanbul, Turkey [2].

The two cities: similarities and differences

There are many similarities that interconnect Seattle and London. Most prominent is the spoken word, maybe not the King’s English, but English just the same. Both share similar governance derived from England’s strong democratic ways founded in the Magna Carta. Both cities have similar temperate/wet climates, latitudes and altitudes (at sea level). Both are international seaports located some distance from the sea – London is on the Thames, Seattle set within Puget Sound.

Their differences are also significant. The City of Seattle is less than 200 years old, whereas, London is 2000. London is also significantly more dense with a much larger metropolitan population of over 8 million, whereas, Seattle is approximately 2 million. Both have diverse regional populations of
approximately 2 times their metropolitan size. Seattle is not a capitol city, whereas, London is a national capitol. Although these similarities and differences are interesting to ponder, the thrust of this paper is to explore the two cities positive and negative urban growth strategies over the past half century.

Seattle, Washington, USA

Let us begin with Seattle. Seattle is a major metro-region set between the beautiful Puget Sound basin and the majestic Cascade Mountains in the Pacific Northwest. For various social, economic and ecological reasons, it is experiencing rapid population growth which offers many quality of life opportunities and environmental challenges for its growing population. These growth consequences need careful study and fortunately, the city has taken on the challenge. This quest was the focus of a fine investigative report entitled “The Peirce Report” by the Seattle Times, a daily newspaper. It was an effective synthesis of the best and worst of times, of a sustainable future or a problematic free market approach to urban growth. It addresses the following in a seven-part series entitled “Puget Sound in the 90’s: the challenge of growth, the cost of sprawl, the danger in failing to act” [3]:

- **Congestion and sprawl**: A thousand and one delayed decisions and environmental time is running out fast in Puget Paradise.
- **Sprawl stalks a stunning natural treasure and the bitter harvest**: Unchecked growth sets the scene for ecological tragedy in 10 years.
- **No one’s in charge and politics of postponement**: Local decision-makers have lost the public confidence, but vigorous leaders may yet emerge (along with an effective regional coordinating council similar to the Greater London Council).
- **Critical need for learning, training and caring**: Helping others is no longer an option – it’s the only way we can all prosper.
- **A way to wed conservation with development**: The best of both worlds – compact villages surrounded by open space and beauty.
- **Conspectus**: “The Peirce Report” offers two visions of the region’s future – will we work toward the dream or let the nightmare happen?

“The Peirce Report” generated a great deal of public debate and dialogue. Fortunately, the report was a dynamic factor in activating the governmental planning sector. The Puget Sound Council of Governments similar to the GLC (Greater London Council), initiated Seattle’s “Vision 2020” study. It was a very comprehensive study comparing and evaluating the SEE impacts of five alternative growth scenarios. It used a model proposed by the National and State Environmental Policy Act (NEPA & SEPA), an act which had revolutionary promise, but has been compromised by the past 30 years of deregulation and judicial compromises.

The five alternative strategies and their ecological (SEE) consequences were presented to the public in an extensive series of newspaper supplements, public meetings and phone surveys. The results of this probing public review were
surprising to a country whose past developments have generated auto driven, low-density sprawl. By a significant margin, 90% of the public favored the two clustered alternatives – Major and Multiple Center Plans. The Council then created a combination of the two, integrating the best features of both into what is called the “Preferred Alternative.” This plan has the following principles to manage urban growth in the 21st Century [4].

- Establishes a hierarchy of central places that will cluster urban growth in compact, well-defined communities framed by a network of open space and connected by public transit.
- Mandates public transit and ride-sharing programs to support the center’s concept with a heavy investment in moving people instead of automobiles.
- Emphasizes the importance of “density and design” for new residential areas, with high densities clustering around convenience transit stations.
- Conserves sensitive environmental and historic resources.
- Maintains a strong regional economy and accommodates growth.

These conclusions are currently being developed into planning and strategic policies coordinated by the Puget Sound Council of Governments. Seattle has responded to “The Pierce Report” – they have decided to create the dream and not let the nightmare happen. The Vision 2020 program has developed an excellent process and resultant plan, one which effectively follows the goals of NEPA (summarized in the SEE variables vs. alternative actions assessment matrix illustrated below) and will enhance their long term sustainability by:

- Creating alternative actions.
- Analyzing and comparing the consequences of each alternative action.
- Fostering a process which initiates public review, debate, and decisions.

Figure set 1: Seattle’s clustered Vision 2020 plan and assessment matrix.

Two additional aspects of the Seattle Vision 2020 plan should be emphasized – that the program was developed by an integrative urban and regional planning...
agency (The Puget Sound Council of Governments). This is a fundamental planning strategy, which is necessary to coordinate and integrate plans, policies, and programs. Also, important was the public participatory process – that when the public is presented with a comprehensive set of comparative alternatives, they can make effective choices. Educating the public to SEE variables is a critical challenge of our time. We are not only dealing with the fulfillment of human and societal needs, but also the health and well being of the planet.

Seattle’s regression: Unfortunately, Seattle’s surge in proactive planning has been stymied by a dramatic loss in resources. In 1998 and 2001, the voters approved two devastating tax limiting initiatives. The loss of revenue has crippled the Seattle metropolitan district from funding the necessary transit programs to implement the preferred alternative for urban growth. The voters were enticed by seductive tax cuts without measuring the long-term benefits/costs of the SEE variables. These short-term monetary gains have and will continue to create serious impacts and more auto driven sprawl. Also, the region is in a very serious recession caused in part by these regressive initiatives. The implementation of these critical clustered transit oriented planning strategies continues to allude the will of the people and its governance.

Seattle’s successful cells of sustainable development: Even though Seattle’s Vision 2020 conclusions are being blurred by compromising initiatives, there are many successful cells of sustainable development. The city requires all new public buildings to be LEED’S certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design [5]). LEEDS is a USA version of an environmental assessment method similar to UK’s BREEAM or Canada’s BEPAC. Currently, the need to fund public transit is being hotly debated in the city and state legislature, but unfortunately, auto driven sprawl still is the dominant mode of operation.

There are interesting community cells of sustainability. Most notably, Bainbridge Island which is just some 7 miles across the bay from Seattle (a 35 minute ferry ride). Bainbridge Island has recently completed an award winning new City Hall based upon sustainable principles. The island is building numerous sensitive mixed-use developments and compact residential areas surrounding the village center. It is building an amazing 50 million US dollar environmental learning center with a superb set of buildings based upon sustainable principles and practices [6]. The center is dedicated to on-site education of the youth, the next generation of citizens. It is even using a living machine to reprocess its human wastes. Even within the regressive tax limiting initiatives passed by the State’s voters in 2001, this small community passed a 8 million dollar levy to purchase green ways and green spaces to help control suburban sprawl. It is a very promising cell of sustainable development.
London, England

London is truly a unique city of clustered villages [7&8]. It has evolved over the past 2000 years as the foundation of participatory democracy. Some 50 years before Seattle’s visionary study, London led the world in developing a similar study of urban growth, planning policies and implementing strategies. Sir Patrick Abercrombie and a team of environmental designers developed an internationally acclaimed planning strategy for London [9&10]. London was, as Seattle is now, experiencing tremendous growth. Urban and suburban developments were spreading outward, eating up the surrounding country and prime agricultural land. The infrastructure systems (transportation networks and public services) were being extended to serve these sprawling developments at a very high public cost. These wasteful land use patterns and extensive infrastructure were (and are) like a cancer – an uncontrolled, unhealthy growth of the urban organism, destroying itself and the surrounding regional amenities and resources.

Through extensive study, the Abercrombie team plan allowed for normal urban growth to continue by proposing three “town and country” planning policies. The following sustainable policies are embodied in this amazing town and country planning legislation and resultant plans.

- **Conservation zone:** In order to stop uncontrolled growth, a green belt was established around London to contain sprawl, preserve the surrounding rural resources and countryside, and minimize the inefficient expansion of the urban infrastructure.
Clustered urban growth within London: In order to improve inner London, cohesive villages were redefined as important planning units. Today, London is known as a city of villages. These places may not be completely recognizable by an untrained eye, but the local people strongly identify with the clustered urban villages and neighborhood units. Highgate, Hampstead, Camden Town, etc. are all wonderful villages within the fabric of metropolitan London.

Clustered new towns and old towns within and outside the conservation zone: New towns were established and built some 30 miles from London beyond the green belt. Eight new towns were built with an approximate population of 60-80,000 people each. Many more new towns were built in Britain, the remainder being located around other major cities throughout the country which implemented similar strategies. Also, existing towns outside of London were carefully planned and where appropriate, cluster growth and expansion occurred.

Figure set 3: 1946 GLC Plan with New Towns and GL Plan of Villages

London's regression: In the late 1980's, the political will of the elected government shifted to a more free-market, deregulated posture. The GLC (Greater London Council), that critical urban and regional planning council, which fostered carefully planned growth and proactive city building, was eliminated. In the mood of deregulation, numerous projects were implemented without comprehensive planning and necessary regulations to ensure coordination and quality – the type of developments, which have caused Seattle's problems. During this time, London and many other cities have developed huge urban developments that have compromised these carefully planned concepts. They have created short-term profits and long-term instabilities, costs and numerous SEE impacts. Most notably is the Docklands, the largest urban redevelopment in Europe, prized as a symbol of the free-market enterprise zones, was fast-tracked into a very rocky future. This massive speculative development
lacks a sense of civility, community and urbanity. Equally regressive were numerous other developments built on the perimeter of many cities that encouraged auto-driven sprawl and the decay of city centers, the type of development which has destroyed most US cities. Again, short-term gains have created significant long-term problems.

London’s cells of sustainable development: Fortunately, London is making significant progress towards a more sustainable future. The new housing policy is an important advancement in carefully planned and regulated housing development and community renewal. The policy fosters sustainability with clustered, transit-oriented developments on brown field sites or within existing communities [11].

The many wonderful millennium projects have fostered significant protection of natural and historic resources and important renewal of numerous city centers. Whereas, the 1990’s built the troubled Docklands, the new century is creating a sustainable village for 10,000 people on a derelict industrial Greenwich Peninsula site. It is proposed as a “Beacon of Sustainability.” Its comprehensive design has very advanced SEE strategies for clustering communities, energy and water conservation, recycling, restoration of the ecology of the site, greenways, and public transit [12].

Figure set 4: Greenwich sustainable village and green Sainsburys.
Conспектus: A comparative tale of the best and worst strategies for sustainable urban development

The planning principles derived from this comparative tale of two cities are important to ponder as we work for a sustainable future. What are the “best and worst” paradigms and patterns of urban growth in regards to the fundamental social, economic and environmental (SEE) directives of sustainable development? As Dickens might suggest, are our cities facing an age of wisdom or an era of foolishness, are we facing a spring of hope or a winter of despair? Or as Seattle’s Peirce report concludes, “will we work towards the dream or let the nightmare happen?”

The worst or non-sustainable patterns of urban growth are those that significantly impact our sustainable future. These are patterns that seem to increase short-term gains without measuring long-term consequences. They are generally fostered by piecemeal decisions and deregulated/unplanned developments that perpetuate auto driven sprawl. These free market developments will continue to cause huge long-term impacts for Seattle, London, and all other cities throughout the world. Comprehensive planning which measures these long-term costs is critical to reverse these processes, and if they cannot be eliminated, all long-term costs should be paid initially in impact fees by these regressive patterns of growth, not by society (the general public). As Dickens would suggest, the rich continue to speculate and get richer, while the poor get poorer [and the middle class will pay dearly to correct these future SEE impacts].

The best practices for sustainable development are multiple dimensional and very challenging. Proactive, comprehensive, long term planning is fundamental to progress. We must be “the agents of change instead of the victims of it.”

Public involvement and education is a critically important and often overlooked dimension of sustainable development. Shifting public concern from short-term economies to long-term analysis of SEE variables is a fundamental quest. Local newspapers and agencies have an important role to play in advancing public awareness and involvement. On Bainbridge Island (an active cell of sustainability discussed earlier), the local newspaper consistently has front-page articles on urbanism and environmental issues. These articles are enhanced by probing investigative editorials and a very active set of letters to the editors, which help debate the SEE dimensions of the issues. Public surveys can be effectively used in not only assessing public opinions but also educating the public. Proactive leadership is central to success. This, of course, is generated from an educated voting public. Also, citizen organizations are a very important aspect of public participation and involvement.

Openly and comprehensively comparing growth strategies is another important dimension of effective decision making. This is a critical role of government, local newspapers and agencies. This is a primary goal of the US’s National and State Environmental Policy Acts (NEPA & SEPA), but unfortunately, this legislature has been compromised by free-market attitudes of short-term profits and deregulation. Seattle’s Vision 2020 process verifies that
the public, when openly presented with a comparative analysis of all the issues, can make effective choices about sustainable design policy and strategies.

The best sustainable principles of this comparative tale of two cities are similar – they both deal with integrative urban and regional planning, transit oriented development, clustering of urban growth in multiple centers while retaining a conservative zone of greenways and greenbelts of open space and agricultural land. The only difference is that Seattle’s program is being proposed to solve its current urban growth problems and London’s was proposed some 50 years ago and has been implemented. Both cities have/are experiencing cycles of proactive sustainable development and decline – cycles of the best of times and the worst of times continues.

Detailed comparative studies of various urban growth alternatives have shown significant quality of life and efficiency occurs from clustered urban development. These concentrated developments have been estimated to have approximately twice the efficiency and effectiveness as low-density sprawl. Also, clustered growth can effectively accommodate public transit and these are important answers in resolving our air pollution and energy consumption problems posed by the diffused development and the heavy reliance on the automobile.

If societies can foster the best, the results will be an ecologically integrated fabric of society and the environment. This sustainable development paradigm will be expressed in a coordinated urban and regional plan; a collaborative partnership between the participating public and government; a full awareness of the issues; and sustainable based programs for clustered, transit oriented developments surrounded by greenbelts and greenways.

References

[1] Dickens, C., *A Tale of Two Cities*, first published as a serial in *All the Year Round*, 30 April –26 Nov. 1859