

Commentary

Backing Into the Future

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Los Angeles is a study in stark contrasts. It is a cash-soaked, sun-drenched, dark-nighted, poverty-ridden and burned out city. Yet, "if you were to draw a circle with a 60-mile radius around Los Angeles, and declare the domain an independent nation, it would be the eleventh richest realm on earth [and] . . . the third richest in the western hemisphere. . . . It would have the second highest gross national product per person in the world—ahead of Japan, ahead of all Europe, ahead of the United States" (Joel Garreau, *Edge City*; also Jay Ogilvy, *Fear and Loathing in Los Angeles*, 1993).

In February 1993, a group of scholars and business and civic leaders from the Global Business Network, Rand, the NEA and various universities convened for 2½ days in the City of Angels to discuss why this city portends the future: is it model or menace? Perched on the Pacific rim, Los Angeles is a viscous soup, brimming with diversity and teeming with conflict—a microcosm of global opportunities and uncertainties. Thus, the goal of the World View meeting was to begin the task of looking forward. This was largely accomplished through the exercise of scenario planning.

Myths, Models and Maps

Scenario planning is a specialized form of "myth-making" for which anthropologists are particularly well suited to study. Verbal road maps—scenarios—reshape our assumptions about the past. No one ever really intends to carry out the scenarios as though they were blueprints or plans. Rather, it is the scenario planning process itself that is transformative because it changes the ideas that precede any plan. By reformulating our founding assumptions, scenarios change the way people think. Thus, instead of backing into the future, changed people are reoriented to look forward and plan in new ways.

An example of the formulation matrix of scenarios used in this meeting is shown in Figure 1. The axes of the matrix correspond to two dimensions: (1) events and (2) social organization. "Events"—the vertical axis—consists of two extremes. On one end, relatively random events like the Los Angeles earthquake are contrasted with nonrandom, purposeful outcomes such as the tapestry of freeways and surface streets that keep the city whole.

The horizontal axis contrasts two distinct poles: "organic" and "mechanical" modes of social organization. The organic mode features organizational structures in which each element differs from, but relates to, others in highly specialized and flexible ways. For instance, using the transportation

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example, the freeway system interacts with the surface road system as the overload or failure of one system spills over into the other. Thus the pattern of use of surface streets changes organically and frequently as drivers constantly explore new routes to solve unexpected congestion problems.

This organic mode of navigating the city is contrasted to more mechanical modes of social organization which consist of systems in which the organizational dynamic is dictated in prescribed, rigid and routinized ways. Human hierarchies, while not literally machines, are in a figurative sense some of the finest examples of mechanical organization to grace this earth. Unyielding, they are far more sturdy than the concrete arteries of traffic that serve the city.

These two axes—events and social organization—intersect to form a 2 x 2 matrix of four cells. Each cell is developed as a scenario for the future. Some of these scenarios are only imagined and indicate a direction for change; while others are extreme cases of present-day reality. Each of the scenarios is matched to a corresponding field trip and a film. Films were chosen because of their visual imagery and the fact that they are the products of the driving industry of Los Angeles.

Four Scenarios

Purposeful Evolution—Portals

The premise for this scenario—a nonrandom and purposeful path into the future—presumes the guidance of governmental programs and regulations. Portals is a halfway house for the mentally ill. Over 90% of its support is government sponsored. For this reason it qualifies as an example of a nonrandom path into the future. Portals is organic to the extent that it

represents a community-based innovative program for addressing local needs.

The Portals institution is based on a very simple premise: rather than view mental illness and unemployment as separate problems calling for separate solutions—first therapy, then a job—the fundamental premise is that these two problems interconnect. They share the same symptoms: alienation, lack of connection and disorientation.

Anarchic Breakdown—Para Los Niños

The premise for this scenario—a random, mechanical path into the future—again presumes the intervention of government. But here, intervention takes a sardonic turn. Para Los Niños is a halfway house for the children of the homeless. Within its walls reign quiet, cool colors, soft touches and human kindness for these littlest social atoms, who have fallen out the bottom of the social machine. The executives participating in this field trip listened to and played with the children. In the course of child play, fragmentary bits of the children's beleaguered lives revealed a nightmarish fear and loathing beyond anything experienced by the executives in their brightly lit business worlds.

Para Los Niños is a random response to economic programs of the government which have fomented and unwittingly subsidized this condition. It is a random, grassroots alternative to more mechanized welfare, social services and unemployment programs.

Technocracy—Traffic Control

The premise for this scenario—a nonrandom, mechanical path into the future—is the stuff dreams, nightmares and movies are made of. Los Angeles is a city that lives and dies by the car. Within "Mission Con-

trol," Los Angeles' traffic control center, the mission is to maintain—to keep the corridors of control clear. Not an easy task when neighborhoods long wounded by violence turn to their cars for escape. To a populace stubbornly resistant to public transportation, the car symbolizes individualism's last bastion, a bubble of privacy too easily pricked.

But we are backing into the future by lamenting our lost freedoms of the past.

The Los Angeles Traffic Control could also be seen as a microcosm for Orwellian surveillance as people scramble in a Bladerunner race for that Information Superhighway in the sky. Here, the once familiar terrain of mechanistic surveillance gives way to a less understood infosphere—an electronic Panopticon, reminiscent of Bentham's dark portrait of institutional control wherein all aspects of an interior space are visible from a single view.

Accidental Adaptation—Grand Central Market

The premise for this fourth scenario—a random, organic path into the future—presumes the lack of any strong guidance by the visible hand of governmental systems. The Grand Central Market is based on the natural flows of business informality. First built in 1912, then gutted, it was rebuilt in 1917. The Market is an arrangement of stalls offering a diversity of goods, ethnic foods and clothing, described by one observer as a "permanent floating swap meet." It has endured periods of vibrant activity as well as deterioration. For example, the owners of a tortilla factory pulled out and business dropped off in neighboring stalls. The management responded by helping former gang members form Homeboy Tortillas. These gang members forfeited their \$2000 weekly drug enterprise for the opportunity to work here.

Grand Central Market represents the outcome of a natural stream of Darwinian evolution. Its developers built on natural forces—an economic, social and mythic presence that was already in place. The result, a happy inspired accident. But it is a

See Commentary on page 50

Commentary

Continued from page 52

delicate ecology—poised between failure and runaway growth. If places like the Grand Central Market are to be taken as models for a successful scenario of the future, the ideas must function as seeds or as inspiration, but never as a blueprint. This scenario is about planting seeds, not imposing models. As Lew Phelps of Southern California Edison wryly commented, "nothing can be imposed from the top because there is no 'top' from which it can be imposed."

The writings of Emile Durkheim in the second edition of *The Division of Labor* (1933) served as the inspiration behind these scenarios. In his lifetime, Durkheim never realized his vision of the world. In the same way, we may never really see our scenarios come true for Los Angeles either. But we are fundamentally changed in the making of them. In shaping our future, perhaps it's in the individual that the seeds must first take root: "I've been to the states hundreds of times, but have never seen it like the past two days. I was scared at first, then hopeful, now a bit confused" (Jose Carrillo of Mexico's AMROP International). As individual change is wrought in the scenario planning process, new ways of seeing emerge: "I will never look at LA the same again," said author Bill Gibson.

Mapping the Future

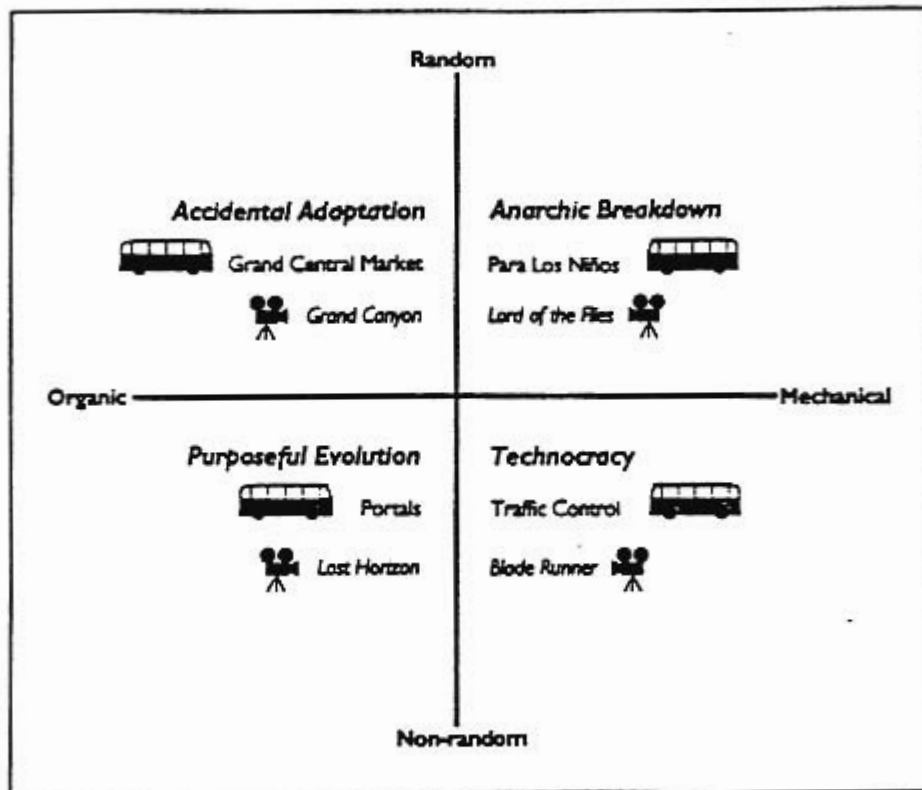
Mapping the future to some extent depends on deconstructing the past, a task for which anthropologists seem particularly well suited. Myth-making is familiar terrain and it is here that anthropologists have much to offer by way of unlocking the cultural determinism in what is deemed "natural" or held above question.

Scenario planning is just one more way to envision the social landscape. In its short tenure as a discipline, anthropology has attempted to paint this landscape from many perspectives. In the early years of the discipline, most paintings were human pastorals of pristine natives viewed from afar. These idyllic pastorals devolved into a

kaleidoscope of cubist renderings as anthropologists internalized their own critiques. We have discovered that the windows through which we have viewed the human landscape also allowed a view in the opposite direction—an interior view, a psychological panopticon. But anthropologists looking inward have had a difficult time seeing clearly in a netherworld of deconstructionist thought, hacking our way through jungles of abstractions of abstractions. Lamentations for these limitations of view can be read in anthropologists' own words on methodology, refinements of observational techniques and endless discussions of reinventing the native and the individual. The construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of the validity and reliability of anthropological methodology has been a philosophical Mobius strip over which the anthropologist seems destined to perpetually slide.

All the looking out and looking in has left anthropologists terribly insecure. Criticisms rooted in methodological unreliability and the judged irrelevance of ethnography have been met with apologetic justifications for why anthropological methods are at best, secondary to those of science. The unspoken meaning is that anthropology is an inferior substitute for science. But we don't need to be defensive. Discovery is an annealing process between induction and deduction and like any scientific explorer, anthropologists do both. Never apologize for unfolding the cultural logic of bullroarers, when economists have their invisible hands and chemists have their Kekule snakes. Here as in all disciplines, metaphor and myth shape our models.

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The Scenario Matrix