

Fragments of a wilderness city

In time, Wilderness City might rekindle memories of that ancient world of myth and legend that still reside somewhere deep in our minds – a world wherein the city becomes again a safe haven, says Bryan Avery.



Bryan Avery is principal of Avery Associates Architects

Once upon a time there were just two basic but deeply significant environments for man. There was the wilderness, that frightening, unknown, unknowable world outside, and there was the home. Be it a cave or house, the home was the only safe haven from man's fears, and for many centuries this vision of a safe haven also defined the meaning of the town.

Gradually and relentlessly, as the towns prospered into cities, the wilderness was driven back and transformed into that safe, 'second nature' of field and farm that we now call countryside. This managed landscape became the 'old England' of the poets, the 'garden England' still revered by many as the ideal pastoral landscape of the national imagination.

But with ninety-three percent of the UK's population already living in towns, and small farmers still leaving the land in large numbers, this pastoral vision of England is largely a myth. At current values, the net worth of agriculture in the UK has sunk to little more than half that of the ready-made sandwich industry. Much of the countryside is now in the hands of agri-business managers, not farmers, and their interest in the land is solely financial.

In Britain we have had almost two hundred years to adjust to this process, but in the developing world the changes have been far more rapid and disruptive. Life in the wilderness was hard, nature unforgiving. Life in the cities promised freedom from the dawn to dusk tyranny of the land, but as a growing tide of people migrated into the cities, their age-old skills and habits were no longer tolerated and looking back at what they had lost, they discovered that the cities meanwhile had taken away the wilderness and redefined it as 'countryside' in its

own image.

We have no adequate words to describe this process. The terms 'environmental' and 'ecological' do not capture the tensions that afflict us, as the deep structures that for millennia had bound our existence to the natural world have slowly been destroyed. The dizzying feeling that 'all that is solid melts into air', with which Marx and Engels famously characterised the first wave of industrialisation, is now the almost universal experience of humankind.

As cities grow inexorably bigger, the developed world's problems are being repeated on an almost unimaginable scale. The explosive industrial growth that saw late-eighteenth-century London transformed into the first million-strong city since Imperial Rome is now, in the developing world, generating several metropolitan areas of more than twenty million people. Faced with such vast, amorphous urban areas we prefer to identify with our particular locality, and the more independent and distinctive that locality is, the higher its perceived cultural and economic value. In London we still call such urban cells 'villages'. We even celebrate them with events like Lambeth's country fair – complete with sheep shearing and hay making – and almost two hundred years after their foundation, we still hold village fêtes in the great London squares.

As urban aesthetes we may increasingly be seduced by the pleasures of the hard-paved 'European City', but we have, over the centuries, created here in the UK a different paradigm for urban living that resonates very subtly with our atavistic human instincts. We should build on this. We need to break the land-cost spiral created by the centripetal plan, and stop the



This village near Dijon, France, evidences the compelling strength of the symbiosis between man and nature.



The world of myth and legend, of dark forests and fearsome encounters with nature still resides somewhere deep in our minds



Life in the Wilderness is hard: Morocco

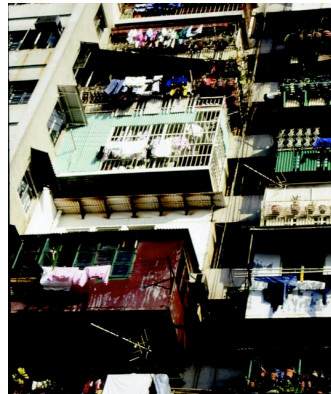
Bryan Avery: Described by World Architecture Magazine as 'London's leading futurist'; his most well known works include the Museum of the Moving Image (MOMI) and the London Imax Cinema at Waterloo, both for the British Film Institute; the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) building in Bloomsbury, and the newly re-opened London Transport Museum in Covent Garden.

mindless accretion of housing and workplaces around the periphery of existing settlements that has devastated the hearts of our towns and created a never-ending chaos of noise, danger and infrastructural change.

We should instead create a multiplicity of centres offering a choice of desirable options, places of distinct but comparable attractiveness, framed by family-friendly residential squares built cheek-by-jowl with busy manufacturing and commercial areas. Such centres would equate to small towns in their own right, and – like the cells of a natural organism – each would be a condensed, living world, protected and made more urban by being confined within its own cell walls. Most of the world’s most cherished urban environments have been constrained in some way, as often as not by a combination of topography and water, or by defensive man-made structures such as town walls or moats.

The ‘walls’ in this new model would be raised ring roads, like 19C railway viaducts and – in a manner reminiscent of Louis Kahn’s celebrated plan to protect the historic core of Philadelphia – at the junction with incoming routes there would be parking silos and interchanges for public transport. In a complete inversion of Ebenezer Howard’s ‘Garden City’ model, the perimeter, not the centre, would be the busiest zone. Each town ‘cell’ could thus be made small, built to the scale of the pedestrian, not the car, and – like ancient Greek and medieval towns – no more than a half hour’s walk across.

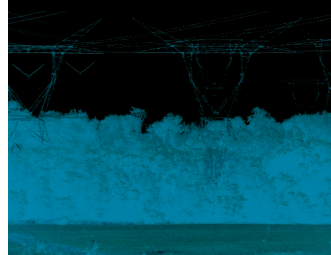
Such townships could be encouraged to develop their own political and economic structures, and thus their own identity and character, but by being inter-linked by rapid expressways and public transit systems, they could be aggregated



Hong Kong balconies. People newly freed from the down to dusk tyranny of the land cannot help but bring their age old habits with them.



Sheep are still brought into the centre of Cairo as if into a village



Pyllons, Appalachians, USA. The danger is that as power and access is provided to the countryside, its lifestyle and fabric becomes increasingly like that of a town.

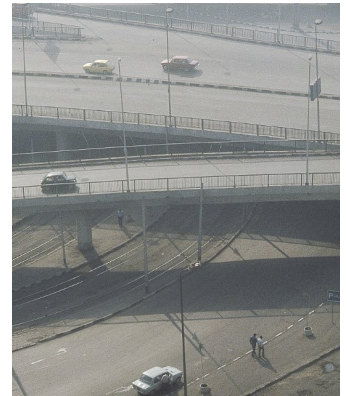
to form a new kind of metropolitan region in which each ‘cell’ would be charged with supporting a specialised city-scale facility.

Imagine London more clearly articulated into its old constituent units – Soho, Covent Garden, Wembley, the City, etc. – each with its own local infrastructure, but defined by a ‘moat’ of public parkland, a cordon sanitaire to protect their individual identities. Over time, some cells would accrete with others to expand – as Canary Wharf has done with the City – while others might be allowed to die, as Docklands did, but without the need to cauterise the entire city.

A richer, denser and more varied city is, however, only one half of the equation. Its inverse and complement – a richer, denser countryside – is equally vital to the Wilderness City vision.

A surprisingly short time ago, when cars were less abundant, it was not uncommon for many country dwellers’ experience of the world to be limited to a few square miles. Knowledge of more distant parts was little more than rumour, the object of mystery and wonder. The countryside was still the great frontier in microcosm, its labyrinthine mystery proportional to its inaccessibility. For as long as this situation prevailed, the countryside retained an epic scale unrelated to its actual size, and our delight in it seemed inexhaustible.

But with the decimation of the hedgerows to create the vast fields demanded by industrialised agriculture, and all too easy vehicular access from the towns, an intensity of use has been unleashed upon the countryside with which it cannot cope. Remoteness and tranquillity have given way to congestion and bustle, bringing danger and destruction, and beauty spots worn thin by over-use.



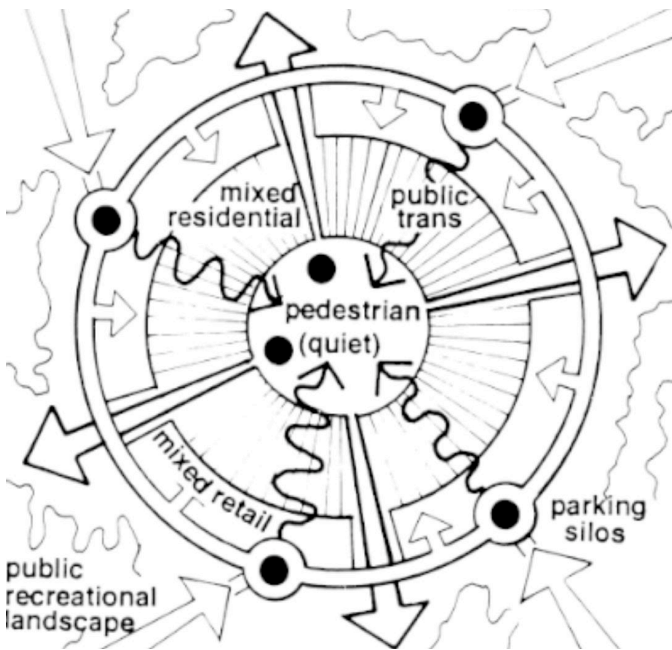
Cairo flyover. An environment such as this isn’t only an ecological disaster, it is also a disaster for the human spirit.



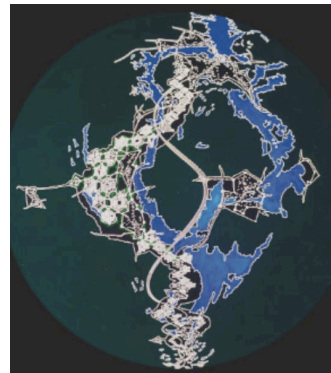
St George’s Square Fete. In London, many of the great garden squares, like Cubitt’s St Georges Square in Pimlico, still hold annual village fetes



Urban Village Pimlico



Wilderness City Celular Plan



Eagle's Eye View Helsinki – Tampere
 This was the first large-scale test of the Wilderness City principles. In response to the demographic changes taking place in Finland that are creating an elderly society and a contracting tax-base, it proposed to condense the entire population of 5m people into an energy efficient and sustainable new high density linear city comprising multiple new walled city cells interlinked with a high speed public transport system. In so doing it also released the Finnish countryside to revert again to the wilderness it once was and to reinstate there the eco systems that once prevailed including the big cats, brown bears and wolves.



Dubrovnic

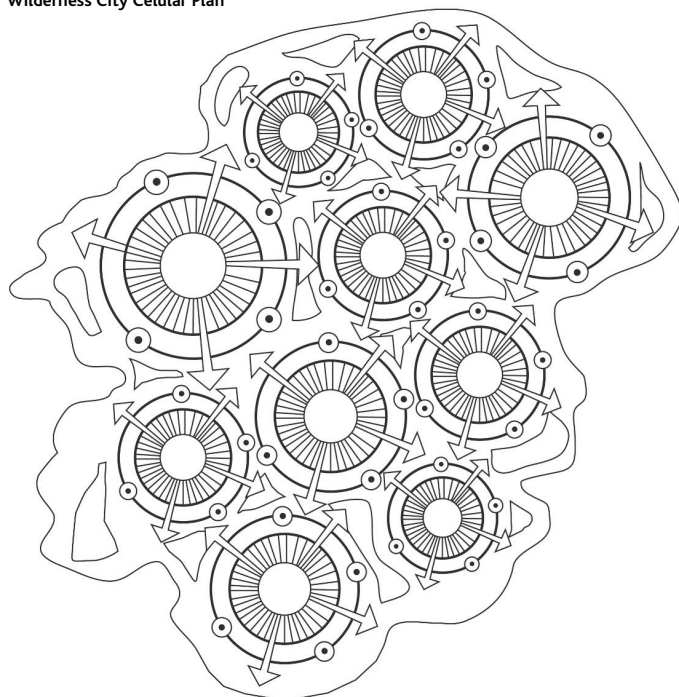


Roads trodden out in medieval times by men's feet and horses' hooves have been widened, straightened and levelled. Distinctive ancient features, blind bends, narrow bridges and tunnelled hedgerows are all now subsumed within the common, utilitarian standards set by the city's engineers to render them safe for suburban passage. What hope now for the rural idyll of 'garden England'?

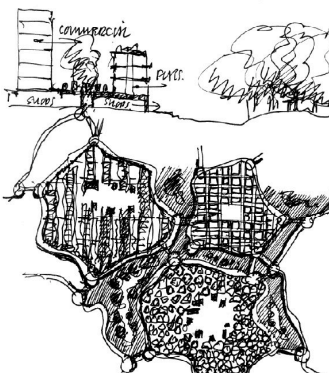
We should be resisting this seemingly inexorable tide of urbanised countryside, saying 'hold on, this isn't the countryside we came for', this no longer offers the deep connections we seek with the slow changing natural rhythms of the seasonal order of this planet.

We should insist that the countryside be beautiful but to be beautiful and distinctive in its own way - as the natural antithesis of the City. Thus the by-ways should be allowed to quagmire; jostling sheep should again bar passage; and - dare one say it - it might even be allowed to become a little dangerous again too. Progressively, we could insist upon its returning to the full and unexpurgated rural idyll of our dreams. We could demand peace and tranquillity in the countryside and declassify the lanes and let them pot-hole. That would help slow things down, and also enable us to dispense then with the white lines, signposts and streetlights. The environmental gains would be enormous and the inconveniences trivial, because our bicycles, motorcycles and cars can cope - indeed, to judge from the advertisements - are now positively designed to cope with just such testing conditions.

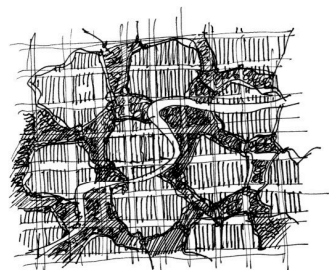
A singular, probably unrepeatable, opportunity is opening up for us. With the growing concern for food-miles and the growth of organic and locally sourced markets, we should mechanise more inven-



Wilderness City Diagram. As the city expands more cells are created and become interlinked in a network of communicating pathways. Visually however, they exist separately, like Guy Debord's 'Guide Psychogéographique de Paris' of 1957, creating nodes of unique character separated by a cordon sanitaire of public parkland.



Wilderness City



South Downs, Sussex: 1990's



South Downs, Sussex: 1940's. Sussex: The wonderfully rich labyrinth of hedge rows and coppices that once characterised the landscape and both cloaked, and absorbed, man's actions there, has been ruthlessly eroded and its capacity to intrigue has been critically undermined.



Whereas previously the countryside had been used only by country-dwellers, now it is the playground of the towns.



Country road, Dorset. The mindless quest for speed has necessitated highly engineered carriageways that they have rent apart so many towns that road-humps and chicanes have had to be installed to slow things down again

tively and use 'just in time' seasonal production methods to make efficient the small fields and coppices of a new garden England. Over time, we could restructure the entire landscape to create a new green matrix in which the labyrinth of the cultivated countryside and new cellular cities could coexist in a mutually beneficial balance. And then we could return the rest to nature, restoring thereby the countryside to the Wilderness of our imagination.

In time, the nationwide mosaic of Wilderness City might rekindle memories of that ancient world of myth and legend, of dark forests and fearsome encounters with nature that still reside somewhere deep in our minds – a world wherein the city becomes again a safe haven and from which, in this new symbiosis of Man and Nature, we might never feel the need to escape again. The Berber tribes of the Atlas mountains still refer to going to town as "going to civilisation": Maybe - in time - we in Britain will be able to say the same.

Following a successful design programme with Portsmouth School of Architecture last year, Bryan Avery will be developing his Wilderness City vision through a year-long series of projects this year at the Welsh School of Architecture. A polemical book on the theme, co-authored with Richard Weston, will also be published shortly.



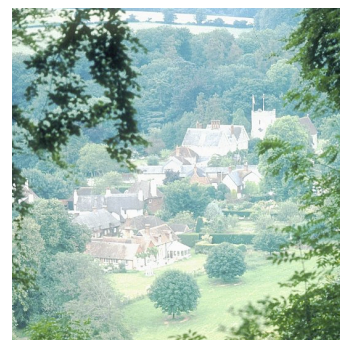
Country road Chicane: Dorset



Petworth Park. Capability Brown understood the very deep connections we make with the landscape; here at Petworth Park; Sussex, he evokes strange resonances with the African savannah.



Sheep in lane. New Forest: The countryside of the future should be beautiful, perhaps a little smelly, and have sheep barring passage.



Selborne: Hampshire