

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 51 – Michael Smith – City Builder

Shaping Civilization

And now a personal word,

I love cities. I love everything about them: the people on the streets, the buildings and cranes, the cafes and restaurants, the stories, histories, and promise. The closer the lights and grit and action, the happier I am.

When I think of Michael Smith's work as a place maker, as someone who envisions the future, who wheels and deals, I am grateful that he is at the helm. He makes big moves: the land swaps, the union station, the public transit, the anchor tenants, and catalyzing plans. He attends to the details: the bicycle trails and public art, the music festivals, the wayfinding and markets, the buskers and magazine stands, and the posters and brochures. I'm amazed when he is on stage at the Charlotte Center City Partners Vision Awards, in front of a thousand people or more, celebrating what the city is becoming, inspiring fellow city builders. What a role to have in life: to shape how we experience civilization.

The International Development Association (IDA) released a report about the value of US downtowns and center cities. Here are words the IDA used to talk about downtowns: center cities have a disproportionate impact on the economy of regions; they are inclusive, providing opportunities and access to essential services to people from all backgrounds; they are vibrant, with multidisciplinary arts and commerce; and they nurture resilience, their mixed uses and assets making a region better able to rebound from shocks and stresses, positioning communities to thrive. City leaders and staff manage these investments, tout competitive strengths, and create programs of work in response to gaps. They guide and poke and prod at the enterprise, measuring results on the ground. They move development forward.

But there are other ways to relate to a city—as a poet and journalist and futurist might. A poet expresses moods about the dark shadows and golden light, about the honk of horns and rumble of trains, about the lure of money and broken lives. The journalist reports on events of the day, on interests and exchanges, on characters and personalities, archiving news on tablets and paper and screens. The futurist identifies trends, casting bones and divining outcomes so that we might protect ourselves and profit from what's to come.

The world of technocrats and courtiers and soothsayers interact. Pieter Levels is a young, Dutch, digital nomad who travels the world with no fixed address, living out of a single backpack, working from coffee shops and coworking spaces, launching online businesses that generate tens of thousands of dollars of income for him per month as a part of a global gig economy. On his website levels.io, he offered this view of the future of cities: “We are entering a future of tech workers living luxury lives in private enclaves financed by corporations isolated from the rest of the world.”

Levels argues that the dominant institutions in the world today are Facebook, Apple, Google, and Amazon and their international corporate hegemonic counterparts. Their private financial reserves dwarf nation-states. Apple alone has more cash reserves than the United States government. All these corporations are building vast technologically advanced campuses that offer workspaces, housing, transportation, and recreation for their highly educated and compensated employees. The companies call them campuses, not cities or towns, to avoid the intrusion of state regulation, but they are self-contained and self-governing enclaves. In one generation, corporations may be running “campuses” with populations of a million people or more—places called New Amazon and Google City.

Cities are forming around tech workers who are not corporate employees but independent freelancers. Massive layoffs during the Great Recession led to coworking spaces for freelancers and now to coliving spaces that will soon become coliving cities. Freelancers now make up the dominant percentage of workers in the world. Entrepreneurial ecosystems and built environments are forming to serve the dawn-to-dusk lives of self-employed workers in affordable housing units with flexible leasing along multimodal transit lines.

Cities that will thrive are those that offer global learning centers and quality of life to new workers and demographics that are emerging. The culture of these cities will converge as top talent will seek similar amenities and similar pay. Second-tier cities will offer attributes of their own, but they will recede in the race for talent and capital. As Pieter Levels notes, this is the new reality of urbanism, whether we like it or not.

Mathieu Helie, a computer scientist, economist, and urbanist who resides in Montreal, Canada, asked in a blog post: why build cities anyway, and what is a city supposed to do? He answered that cities exist to manage uncertainty. Great cities offer a density of relationships that solve problems. He wrote, “[Cities] are complex systems like the organic structures of the natural world. They are multicellular, they are capable of growth and adaptation by changing these cells, and since they transform themselves to meet uncertainty, they are unpredictable, emergent structures.”

That is the challenge and opportunity that Michael Smith and city builders have in front of them: to build complex systems of learning, commerce, finance, energy, technology, design, manufacturing, and the arts in healthy places and spaces that attract and retain top talent that adapt to uncertainty.

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