

Do You Have Your Resident's Permit?

North America's Urban Landscape, Circa 2044

by Barry Mayhew

The story envisions the urban environment in the mid-21st century. The problems associated with urban life in North America have reached intolerable levels and strong anti-growth groups in many US and Canadian cities had succeeded in implementing legislation designed to curtail further development.

Ultimately, citizens are required to obtain a permit if they wish to move from one urban center to another. Much of the story centers on a debate about the rationale for controlling urban growth.

Daniel Benedict paced back and forth in his living room, anxiously awaiting the daily postal delivery. Three months had passed since he had applied to the city of San Francisco for a resident's permit. Dan and his wife Sandra had been married for almost thirty-five years and had settled in the Chicago suburb of Skokie when Dan had accepted a marketing job with a large pharmaceutical company in the nearby suburb of Morton Grove. "Will you please stop pacing the floor Dan, it is very annoying," said Sandra.

Dan was only a few weeks away from retirement and he and Sandra had decided there were places other than metro Chicago where they would like to live out their so-called "golden years."

Seven years ago, in 2035, the residents of San Francisco, as in several major North American cities, had voted by an overwhelm-

ing majority to limit the size of their city. It had been a battle not won easily. Litigation had worked its way through the lower courts until ultimately the Supreme Court, in a 6-3 decision, had decided it was the constitutional right of communities to limit their number of residents. The bill that was ultimately passed stated that residents of an urban area had the right to limit their population provided the proposed by-law was approved by a two-thirds majority.

The concept of limiting the size of cities by direct legislation had developed in several smaller and mid-sized cities in the American southwest during the third decade of the 21st century. The impetus for this movement had derived in large measure from severe water shortages. Keeping exclusive golf courses verdant and swimming pools filled had placed severe pressure on the availability of potable water for drinking and the irrigation of precious farmland. Other problems had also plagued most major urban centers, not the least of which were a deteriorating infrastructure and global warming. The period between conception and implementation had lasted nearly four years and had been marked by intense and often bitter debate. The principal opposition had come from such self-interest groups as developers, local business owners, chambers of commerce and local politicians. Civil liberty groups had also been extremely vocal and demonstrations were rife.

All the old arguments had been resurrected and the all too familiar protestations of "you



can't stop progress," "we must keep growing," "we must develop this area to its maximum potential" and "we must broaden the tax base" were heard over and over again, but were somehow less convincing than they had been in past decades.

Conditions in many large urban centers had deteriorated to such an extent by 2025 that legislation to control demographic patterns had, in the view of many prominent thinkers, become essential. In fact, such controls probably should have been implemented a decade earlier but cultural values evolve slowly and there is always resistance to change. Benedict perceived himself as being a rational man and so he had accepted the inevitability of population control in urban areas since the concept was first seriously proposed. There were many others, however, through naiveté, selfish motives or just plain stupidity, who had vigorously resisted what they interpreted to be another in the seemingly endless intrusions into individual freedom of choice by the heavy hand of government.

It seemed that the larger the city, the more intense the problems became. New York was one of the prime examples of this phenomenon with its polluted air and water, water shortages, unbearable congestion, power failures and "brownouts," not to mention the myriad social problems that had intensified.

Daniel, having no pressing demands on his time during the rest of the morning, relaxed and

let his mind wander back in time to the early stages of the urban population control debate and the numerous arguments that had been put forth by leading spokespersons in both camps. The fundamental conflict had centered on the rights of the individual. Freedom of mobility had been firmly established as an inalienable right in North American and Western European society. Proponents of control had argued convincingly, however, that for centuries most nations had maintained elaborate immigration policies that effectively controlled who could and who could not enter their country. Was it that much different, they argued, to apply this principle to urban population movements? Surely the residents of a particular city should also have the right to decide whether or not they want the size of their city controlled and furthermore what the maximum population should be. A leading urban geographer had effectively presented the argument in layman's terms when he stated, "The choice is simple. Is it more desirable to have 10,000 people living in an area of one square mile and enjoying a relatively high quality of life or 100,000 or more people jammed into the same area so that we can maintain that bastion of democracy, freedom of mobility?"

Canada had, as was often the case, adopted the concept several years after the US. By 2025, more than one-third of the Canadian population was residing in the three metropolitan areas of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. This

irrational pattern had led the Canadian authorities to introduce legislation whereby all urban centers with populations in excess of 50,000 were entitled to hold referenda to determine the wishes of their tax-paying property owners regarding further growth.

Canada was still a major recipient of immigrants from various nations throughout the Globe but, by 2035, those who qualified for Canadian citizenship were restricted in their choice of residence to those communities that had no population control legislation in place or which had not as yet reached their democratically determined upper limit. Once they had obtained citizenship, however, they were then entitled to apply for a resident's permit to any city provided they had secured employment in advance to ensure they would not become applicants for local welfare programs. The other criterion for eligibility was proof of a sufficient net worth to ensure they would not require any form of social assistance.

A small group of far-sighted professionals, consisting of some planners, urban geographers and ecologists, had refused, however, to endorse the majority stand. The leading spokesman for this maverick group, a geographer named MacArthur, adamantly rejected the argument that the control of urban population size was an unachievable objective. He proceeded to point out that during the 2020s the US had achieved full "demographic maturity," a state he described as the condition wherein the birth rate and mortality rate were in equilibrium. Canada had also reached this plateau a short time later. Unlike Mexico and the Central American countries, the two northernmost nations within the North American continent no longer had to cope with the natural increase in population.

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Only two problems remained and both could be resolved through legislative initiatives. Assuming no significant changes occurred in the present pattern, overall population changes could only occur through immigration and emigration. Both of these processes, MacArthur argued, could be controlled by government policy.

Duncan MacArthur had a well-earned reputation in the academic world as well as being an activist. Other labels often ascribed to him were maverick and iconoclast. As a young assistant professor at Cal. Berkeley, he became intimately involved in the debate over the effects of global warming and often referred to himself as a disciple of the outstanding Canadian climatologist Andrew Weaver. MacArthur's interest in urban phenomena had developed in the 2020s when he had spent a sabbatical as a visiting scholar at the University of Antwerp's Urban Studies Institute.

Some of MacArthur's detractors suggested that this ambitious plan would be shattered if a significant change in birth or death rates were to develop as had been the case in the early 1960s when oral contraceptives first gained widespread acceptance. Should this occur, MacArthur was quick to respond, birth rates could be encouraged upward or downward by temporary revisions in personal income tax rates. Such revisions would provide sufficient incentive for a period long enough to bring fertility and mortality back into balance. The crux of his thesis had been revealed on a nationwide television debate during which several speakers had discussed the issue of controlling unwanted urban growth. He went on to say what most people were well aware of. Cities can grow in only two ways. One form of growth is outward and there are few North American cit-

ies that have not experienced urban sprawl. On the periphery of most cities is found agricultural or some other form of non-residential land use. The process of sprawl, therefore, necessitates the re-zoning of these areas to residential use. The solution is really quite simple: if we establish the maximum outward limit of residential growth and establish an agricultural greenbelt of considerable width, sprawl will be effectively controlled. This concept is often referred to as “urban containment.”

The second form of urban growth, as MacArthur explained, involves an increase in population within the existing boundaries of a city. In order for this process to occur, however, local government officials must yield to the pressures of developers and land speculators to re-zone existing city areas for higher density residential use. If the residents of a city democratically decide on the maximum geographical limits to which they want their city to grow and the maximum number of people they wish to reside within the designated area, zoning regulations could then be easily established to ensure no appreciable population increase beyond the desired limit. The solution, therefore, involves first establishing the size of city the majority of residents want, developing a master plan to achieve this objective and, perhaps most important, resisting the pressures initiated by those who would attempt to deviate from the official plan for their own personal gain.

MacArthur had obviously hit a sensitive nerve because one panel member, a major developer named Mr. G. Reed, leapt to his feet and called MacArthur a son-of-a-bitch before the startled technicians were able to shut down the audio feed. The moderator of the program became flustered and vainly attempted to calm the enraged developer who by this time was pounding his fist on the table and spewing out insults which only the studio audience could hear as the technicians by this time were working feverishly to try to restore the sound portion of the broadcast.

Benedict smiled as he remembered clearly how MacArthur had sat perfectly still during the tirade and merely smiled at his emotional

adversary. He was certainly a “cool” dude that MacArthur, Benedict thought. The many years he had spent defending his frequently controversial views against other academics had prepared him well for such a confrontation.

The moderator finally succeeded in calming the obnoxious developer and obtaining a verbal guarantee that he would refrain from any further outbursts. The audio portion of the program resumed and MacArthur at this point looked the developer straight in the eye and said, “I must say to you, Sir, that I find your reference to my ancestry rather offensive. I am somewhat relieved, however, for I thought at one point during your outburst that you might accuse me of being a communist.”

Some things had not changed appreciably since the beginning of recorded history, MacArthur mused. If your opponent held views that were considerably left of centre on the political spectrum, the simplest “put down” was to accuse him of being a communist. If, on the other hand, someone’s beliefs were right of center, the most effective comeback was to brand them a reactionary or a fascist. It was strange, Benedict thought, that despite the almost exponential rate of technological gain that had occurred since the industrial revolution, greed, intolerance, insecurity and most other facets of human behaviour were essentially the same since time immemorial. The developer, meanwhile, had with considerable difficulty been able to regain his composure and the debate continued.

“It is individuals like myself,” he stated, “who have made this country the envy of the rest of the world. We have seen opportunities and have taken the necessary risks to transform our ideas into realities. It is ivory-towered intellectuals like you with your leftist leanings who would destroy incentive, the very essence of what has made this nation what it is today. You, Professor MacArthur, have a drawbridge mentality.”

“I have a what?” MacArthur replied.

“You are like the medieval fellow who is seeking refuge, comes to a castle protected by a moat, crosses the moat and then wants the drawbridge operator to lift the drawbridge to prevent anyone else from entering the castle.”

"I am relieved," MacArthur responded, "that you are prepared to accept responsibility for making this country what it is today. While it is true that North Americans, on average, enjoy a higher material standard of living than persons in most other parts of the world, where, outside America, can one find a higher incidence of narcotics addiction, alcoholism, family breakdown and the highest percent of the adult population incarcerated?" MacArthur continued, "I hope you will also acknowledge your contribution to unhealthy levels of pollution, vehicular gridlock and road rage, noise pollution and other problems that plague most of our urban centers today. We have indeed achieved a remarkable level of economic growth but we have also experienced a shocking deterioration in our quality of life, particularly in our large cities. Perhaps the time has come to re-assess our order of priorities."

Another member of the panel, a Mr. Johnston, the CEO of a large steel company, had taken a more "middle of the road" posture and agreed with MacArthur that perhaps North Americans had placed too high a priority on economic growth and that conditions in most major North American cities certainly left much to be desired. He supported MacArthur's position further by making reference to the fact that a recent survey had concluded there were in excess of one hundred million unregistered hand guns in the US and Canada. "Surely," he stated, "this suggested there is something fundamentally wrong with our values and with our way of life. We should also appreciate the fact that since the early 1970s there has been a proliferation of walled communities complete with private security forces in the more affluent suburbs throughout North America. I also agree with your earlier comment, Professor MacArthur, concerning our definition of progress. We have operated for decades on the premise that any growth is sacrosanct and that we should not inhibit the path of progress. It has become obvious, however, that uncontrolled growth is not necessarily good and that perhaps the term progress should be redefined. At the present time progress, within the urban context, would seem to mean destruction of the natural

environment and replacing it with asphalt and concrete and seeing how many people we can crowd into a given area."

"As a corporate executive," he continued, "I am a little concerned, however, over the difficulty we might have in transferring our employees between our various operations under your proposed scheme. We would risk stagnation if we were unable to relocate our management personnel. I am also sceptical of your proposal for another reason. While I do not consider myself an expert in location analysis, it seems obvious to me that we have no control over the distribution of resources critical to our operations. If we were to discover a deposit of high grade iron ore, say five miles outside the boundary of a city that had decided to curtail further growth, your scheme would prevent us from exploiting its potential. Construction and operation of a mine requires hundreds of workers who would naturally want to set up residence in the nearest urban center. It is, I suggest, unrealistic to declare a total moratorium on economic growth unless we are prepared to accept a decline in our standard of living."

MacArthur, by this time, was becoming noticeably impatient with his detractors. "Look," he said, "I'm not suggesting a total moratorium on all development, nor do I think a decline in our living standard is necessary. Certainly there could be situations similar to those you have just described for which I have no pat answer. My immediate reaction, however, is that any control system must contain a certain degree of flexibility in order to adjust to unexpected developments. For example, perhaps we could allow temporary deviations beyond the established maximum population level and then take steps to reduce the overall population back to the formerly established limit over a period of, say, five years."

Another panel member, Peter Pollenski, the mayor of a medium-sized Canadian city, was the only one to inject a modicum of levity into the debate when he referred to his city's Chamber of Commerce as the local chapter of the Flat Earth Society. His Worship related how developers had convinced, or perhaps even bribed

in some cases, elected councils in several outlying municipalities to approve zoning changes that allowed high density projects. One result of these zoning changes had been bumper-to-bumper traffic jams for those residents who had to commute to and from their jobs in the inner city. When asked by an audience member how such a problem could be resolved, Mayor Pollenski responded by telling the audience,

City planners, civil engineers and politicians are quick to identify and acknowledge such symptoms as pollution, congestion and crime but ignore, or refuse to acknowledge, the root cause of these problems.

“The solution is to do nothing and allow commuter frustration to reach the point of intolerable. When this point is reached, suburbanites will rebel and elect candidates who will reject development proposals that, if approved, would exacerbate an already intolerable situation.”

A critical turning point in the debate seemed to have been reached when MacArthur offered an analogy with which most reasonable people could readily identify. Pointing a finger at the developer he asked his vociferous opponent: “I understand you are a member of the Pinewoods Golf and Country Club. Is that correct?”

“Yes I am,” the developer replied.

“Could I become a member of your club?” MacArthur asked.

“No, I’m afraid not, at least not now,” was Reed’s reply.

“Tell me Mr. Reed; why is that?”

“Well, we are full up at present but you could put your name on the waiting list,” Reed answered.

“I’m not sure what you mean by full up,” MacArthur replied.

“What I mean is that the members own the club and they should, therefore, have the right to decide the number of members they think is appropriate. We feel, collectively, that the addition of any further members would result in over-

crowding in the restaurant and lounge areas, longer waits for tee-off times, insufficient parking spaces, wear and tear on the greens, escalating general maintenance costs and other negative results,” was Reed’s response.

MacArthur responded; “I think I understand your concerns. What I interpret your comments to mean is that too many members would impact negatively on the quality of life of the

current members while at the club. Is that essentially what you are telling us?”

“Yes, I’d say that’s about the size of it,” Reed replied.

“This will likely come as a shock to you, Mr. Reed, but I completely agree with you,” was MacArthur’s unexpected response. “That being the case, then I must conclude that you would support my proposition that the same principle is equally applicable to cities.”

The rather taken-aback developer was silent for several seconds while he attempted to come up with a rebuttal. “But it’s not the same. We members have purchased shares in a holding company that, in turn, owns the club’s assets,” the developer stated emphatically. “In addition, we are assessed an annual maintenance fee.”

MacArthur was well-prepared for this argument. “The property owners within an urban community also own the land upon which their properties are located as well as the infrastructure located within the boundaries of their city. And like you and the other members of your club who pay an annual membership fee, the property owners in a city pay an annual property tax. So if the folks who own the assets of your club, and who pay an annual maintenance fee for its upkeep, can restrict the number of people who can belong, then why shouldn’t the

property owners within an urban community have the right to restrict their 'membership?' I have another question for you, Mr. Reed. If you decided to take your family to a certain resort and were advised that there was no space available during the time period you requested; would you mount a protest and claim that your democratic rights were being denied?"

"No, of course not," the developer replied.

"Neither would I," MacArthur stated. "There are situations wherein it is both rational and appropriate to accept that there is no vacancy available at certain times. Here is another situation you may want to ponder. Have you ever attempted to book a flight and been advised by a passenger agent that the flight was fully booked?"

"Yes many times," Reed replied.

"When that happened did you expect the airline to roll out another aircraft to accommodate you?"

"No, of course not, that would be absurd," Reed answered.

"But you could go on 'standby' and hope someone cancels or is a 'no-show,'" MacArthur added. "I suspect you would be quite prepared to book a reservation on the first flight on which there was an available seat. Is that really much different than having to wait for a vacancy in a city to which you decided you wanted to reside?"

MacArthur continued: "Let me make one more comment that I think is relevant, Mr. Reed. This evening we have identified many of the problems facing our large cities. I suggest to you that these are merely symptoms whereas we should be focusing on the root cause of these symptoms. I have several physician friends who have often raised the issue that in the field of medicine, doctors sometimes fall victim to the practice of focusing on a patient's symptoms rather than the root cause of their illness. This is not much different from city planners, civil engineers and politicians who are quick to identify and acknowledge such symptoms as pollution, congestion and crime but ignore, or refuse to acknowledge, the root cause of these problems."

"Perhaps I can simplify my position even further," MacArthur went on. "Would you agree there are some cities that are perceived to be more desirable than others?"

"Yes, of course," Reed replied.

"Then if you allow people to keep coming to these cities you will eventually destroy many of features and amenities that made them appealing in the first place."

During the studio audience participation segment, an elderly gentleman rose from his chair and made the following comment: "We supposedly live in a democracy. Isn't it anathema to our way of life to restrict our citizens from locating wherever they choose?"

"No, not really," said MacArthur. "We have millions of square miles of land dedicated to public parks, national monuments and military establishments where access is restricted or in which you certainly are not allowed to take up residence and few people find this objectionable. Similarly, I don't think it's at all undemocratic for a group of landowners to decide they do not want any further development in their community."

Reed by this point had a defeated countenance. The logic his adversary had presented left him with no further arguments in their community counterpoint. MacArthur's application of Aristotelian logic won him many converts that evening.

An eerie silence fell upon the studio audience. Daniel Benedict smiled as he remembered that moment clearly. It had made him a convert to this progressive way of thinking and it had had a similar impact on millions who were watching the debate on international TV. The remainder of the debate had been relatively innocuous. MacArthur's analogy and the obvious fact that there was a strong positive correlation between excessive urban growth and a host of physical and social problems had caused many former sceptics to re-think the whole issue of uncontrolled urban growth and its ramifications.

The debate, scheduled to last one hour, had continued for nearly three. Thousands of telephone calls flooded the network's switchboard urging an uninterrupted continuation of the de-

bate. The CEO of the network had personally intervened and pre-empted the scheduled programming in response to popular demand.

Although one could not directly relate the result of the debate to any specific legislative action, an estimated 80 million viewers had listened intently to the various arguments put forth by the panel members. Clearly, however, it had been a critical turning point in the urban growth debate for it was only a matter of weeks before urban population control committees began forming in several cities in the western US.

The first legal action had occurred in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where a circuit court judge had ruled in favour of the local population committee's request to include a population control initiative on the ballot in the next civic election. Opponents were quick to launch an appeal, however, and nearly four years of litigation followed before the issue came before the Supreme Court. What had been an almost unthinkable violation of human rights in the early 2000s had become relatively commonplace and applying for a Resident's Permit to the city of Eugene, Oregon, was now perceived by most citizens to be as normal as applying to the Australian Government for a visa had been 20 years earlier.

Daniel Benedict's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the porch. He resisted, only with great difficulty, the impulse to dash to the front door and retrieve what he hoped might be the long awaited document. He waited, however, until the sound of footsteps faded before removing a large white envelope from the mail box. He was relieved to see it bore a San Francisco postmark. He sat down on the sofa, lit a cigarette, carefully opened the envelope and removed its contents.

The letter read:

Dear Mr. Benedict:

I am pleased to inform you that the Advisory Committee has reviewed your qualifications and has accepted your application for a resident's permit. I regret, however, that you will not be eligible for a permit immediately. Our Statistical Dept. maintains detailed

records on fertility, mortality and emigration and estimates you will become eligible in approximately three years. Should you decide to pursue this matter further you will be required to provide proof that you have secured employment in the San Francisco area at least 60 days before your arrival. Alternatively, you have the option to provide evidence that you have a sufficient net worth to support yourself (and your family, if applicable) if you are not seeking employment in the Bay area.

Yours truly,

*H. V. Renwick, Chairman
Advisory Committee
Population Control Center
City of San Francisco*

Damn bureaucrats, Benedict thought. They can go to hell if they think I'm going to wait another three years to escape these frigid winters. There must be an alternative. He remembered an old issue of US News and World Report he had saved that contained a feature article titled "Pleasant Places to Live in the US." After a few minutes of rummaging through an old filing cabinet the document was found. Benedict quickly scanned the article which contained reviews of such communities as Lexington, Kentucky, Orlando and Naples, Florida, Boulder, Colorado, Salem, Oregon, and Palo Alto, California.

Palo Alto, he thought, maybe that's my alternative. It's only a short drive to San Francisco and, as I remember, it was a very pleasant little city. If they reject my application, I might try Orlando. And if not Orlando, then Boulder, and if not Boulder, then perhaps Salem or Lexington. Come hell or high water I'm getting out of here sometime soon. I've spent my last winter in this damned Midwest.

Barry Mayhew, Ph.D., is an urban geographer by academic training but spent most of his professional life as a corporate executive and latterly as a management consultant. He has more than 20 publications in an eclectic array of magazines and professional journals. He is retired and lives in Victoria, British Columbia.