"Ecumenopolis":
Doxiadis's City of the Future

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This paper examines "Ecumenopolis," the global "City of the Future" envisioned by C.A. Doxiadis as an urban network that cut across geopolitical boundaries. The vision of Ecumenopolis was widely embraced by many post-WWII global visionaries—of the likes of Fuller, Tyrwhitt, Abrams, and Fathy—as a long-awaited corrective to the modernist project and a rational response to postwar problems of urbanization. Presenting Ecumenopolis as the key to spreading socioeconomic modernization, Doxiadis secured the support of many international institutions (United Nations, the World Bank, and the Ford Foundation) which aspired to restructure so-called "underdeveloped" societies according to the paradigm of the industrialized West in the name of equality, democratization, and anti-communism.

This paper focuses on the first manifestation of Doxiadis's vision, namely, the 1958 proposal for restructuring Baghdad. Moving from the overall master plan to the design and construction of specific housing units and public squares, the paper demonstrates how the Iraqi capital provided a uniquely favorable laboratory for rethinking the scientific and technocratic claims of modernism. The paper exposes the paradoxes in Doxiadis's attempt to "import" modernization to Iraq, and to "export" local knowledge (Iraqi building traditions) to other "underdeveloped" parts of Ecumenopolis. Ultimately the paper uncovers the pitfalls in Doxiadis's postpolitical vision of the globe, while it also demonstrates that the history and politics of Ecumenopolis in general, and of Baghdad, 1958 in particular, can enlarge the critical dimension within which today's politics of modernization and globalization can be analyzed.

Figure 1: Map of Ecumenopolis. (Image: Doxiadis and Papaioannou, Ecumenopolis, The Inevitable City of the Future (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), 362-363.)

The concept of Ecumenopolis crystallized in the late 1950s, while Constantin Doxiadis was making a name for himself as a global architect/planner who collaborated with international funding institutions and national governments to design complexes, infrastructures, urban plans, and regional studies around the world.¹ Doxiadis imagined Ecumenopolis as a globally interconnected network of cities covering the entire earth in the form of a continuous settlement by the end of the 21st century. (Figure 1) Influenced by postwar trends in regional planning that favored urban industrialization in the name of economic growth, he proclaimed that the expansion of cities was irreversible, and that the move from megalopolis (the coming together of several metropolitan areas, which was already observed in several industrialized areas) to Ecumenopolis was inevitable. The challenge then, for the architect/planner, was not to halt metropolitan development but to "guide" it, as Doxiadis argued, in an "orderly" fashion so as to temper the effects of urbanization.²

Doxiadis's vision of Ecumenopolis was widely embraced by many post-World War II global visionaries—such as Buckminster Fuller, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Charles Abrams, and Margaret
Mead—as a long-awaited response to postwar urban predicaments. Along with his supporters, Doxiadis formed the "City of the Future" (COF) research team to study the processes leading towards Ecumenopolis, with the ambition of foreseeing the future and accounting for it. Acting like a group of development consultants, the COF team surveyed cities in several parts of the world, conducting meticulous analyses of their economic development prospects, population growth, and resource constraints. The team produced fantastically detailed maps of the world's regions, examining how to promote economic development hand-in-hand with an orderly transformation of the physical environment. Presenting Ecumenopolis as the key to spreading socioeconomic modernization, Doxiadis secured the support of many international institutions (the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Ford Foundation) and national governments, which aspired to restructure so-called "underdeveloped" societies according to the paradigm of the industrialized West in the name of equality, democratization, and anti-Communism.

The concept of Ecumenopolis allowed Doxiadis to reform Modernism and disseminate it around the globe. This paper situates Doxiadis's concept within the larger context of post-World War II concerns about environmental degradation, and postwar dreams of a peaceful, egalitarian future.

Let us focus on a small piece of the global puzzle—a plan for one city. More specifically, I will discuss the plan for Baghdad (1958), an ambitious proposal by Doxiadis's firm for the socioeconomic restructuring of the entire Iraqi capital. (Figure 2) The plan aimed to turn Baghdad's urban core into a dynamic element that would expand continually along one axis in order to avert congestion and to facilitate continual growth. The Tigris River, which runs through the city, suggested the direction of a Northwest-Southeast axis, which in turn determined the orientation of the elongated rectangle that was supposed to define the city's future limits. (The image shows a city 3 times larger than it was in 1958). Major roads run either parallel or perpendicular to this axis, to provide an easy connection of the city to the country and eventually to connect the region with other urban concentrations. Residential sectors were organized according to a rectangular grid. The commercial and business district incorporated the existing city center, but its future growth would have to abide by the rectilinear logic of the master plan. So-called "green spaces" filled the gaps left between the rectilinear grid and the winding river. Industries were pushed to the edges of the elongated rectangle that defined the city in order to preserve the overall visual order that was central to Doxiadis's Modernist aesthetic.3

Doxiadis's logic of functional separation extended to the system of social ordering. Each residential sector was broken down into smaller community units arranged hierarchically. The smallest was a "class I community," constituted by 10-20 families of similar income. A group of 3-7 such communities made a "class II community," also with a homogenous economic status. House types also corresponded to the income-based hierarchy. An agglomeration of class II communities plus an
elementary school became a "class III" community. Class III communities of different income groups, plus a market and shops, a teahouse and a mosque, could constitute a "class IV" community of one to two thousand families. (Figure 3)

If the overall functional logic echoed an aesthetic of order and efficiency that was favored by the interwar urban visionaries of CIAM, Doxiadis's emphasis on individual "communities" aimed to propose a corrective to the Modernist project, and to provide for more than functional satisfaction by expressing the collaborative aspirations of people. The creation of "communities" (a term which often replaced "shelters" and "neighborhood units" at the time) was seen as the basis for creating a culturally sensitive plan that would help "the development of social balance amongst several classes of the citizens." The advantages of "community" were also given an explicit anti-Communist spin: A New York Times article praising Doxiadis's Baghdad project argued that the creation of a strong sense of community would prevent urban dwellers from being, as the article put it: "overly susceptible to conversion by Communist agents." In other words, the aspiration to create a peaceful "balance" and harmonious "communities" was intimately tied to Cold War anxieties.

Indeed, Doxiadis Associates' promise to nurture social interaction among diverse income groups and to support the creation of "social balance" was immensely appealing to both the pro-Western Iraqi monarchy and international bodies; for they were nervously hoping that Iraq's transition from a landlord system to a more egalitarian economy would be peaceful (and would not, for example, replicate the experience of Egypt, where, in 1952, a revolution brought about the establishment of Gamal Abdel Nasser's socialist regime). In the end, however, a military coup in July 1958 led to the brutal demise of the pro-Western Iraqi monarchy, and radical changes in Iraq's sociopolitical agenda. Doxiadis Associates' commission was cancelled a few months later. But by then, Doxiadis Associates had completed the construction of hundreds of units that would become the precedent for many of the firm's future projects.

The theme of creating a smooth transition to modern urban life was central to the overall organization of Doxiadis Associates' plan for community sectors. With this objective, they made a number of gestures meant to accommodate cultural particularity within the modular functional plan. These included hammams and mosques, as well as occasional markets that attempted to reproduce the vault of traditional souqs. All of these aimed to make Doxiadis Associates' interventions compatible with local cultural preferences. The irony, of course, lies in the very idea that a few public baths, or mosques, or covered markets could accommodate the aspirations of the local population. It is more an example of cultural stereotyping than of an understanding of the
real dynamics of modern Iraqi culture.

Local particularity was also an important theme in Doxiadis Associates’ housing designs. The firm established “research programs” to analyze local climate, materials, and methods of construction in Iraqi towns and villages. Researchers studied local mud-brick construction methods, evaluated the microclimatic benefits of wind catchers, and analyzed the thermal benefits of courtyards and wooden screens. In the end, however, elements like courtyards and screens had to be reduced to standardized forms so as to be utilized in mass production. In the design of house types for Baghdad, Doxiadis Associates pushed the courtyards of dwellings to the side of the house, or even to the “back” to save space and maximize the repetition of housing modules on the rectilinear plan. Overhangs shaped to provide maximum shading for windows; screens configured to increase wind pressure and provide privacy; and schematic versions of a courtyard: these elements were transported into standardized housing modules. In other words, locally inspired forms and methods were utilized only to the extent that they would not become an obstacle to the grand formal and social order envisioned by Doxiadis.

I will not dwell on the details of his housing schemes here, but simply point out that Doxiadis’s conception of cultural particularity was confined within the framework of his unified theory, which moved from global to local imperatives, from “macro” to “micro.” This one-way hierarchical relationship reduced each urban center to a mere piece in a bigger managerial puzzle. This is why the same planning principles were also exported to other cities that Doxiadis’s firm planned, such as Homs and Hama in Syria, Islamabad, Pakistan, and beyond. In each case, the autochthonous culture, delimited by climate, materials, labor, or quantifiable habitation patterns, was incorporated into the meta-rationality of Ekistics’ analyses of income groups, traffic patterns, statistical standards of minimal comfort, and the aesthetic imperative of standardization: these were the parameters of the urban environment. Each of these cities was ultimately to be incorporated into the global network of urban concentrations.

Let us now return to Ecumenopolis. The concept obviously reflects Doxiadis’s confidence in outlining the future shape of cities around the world. It also spoke to larger postwar dreams of “global sharing” and the “co-habitation of nations,” especially since Ecumenopolis—a term with quasi-spiritual connotations of ecumenical unity—was often described as a planetary “home.” Furthermore, Ecumenopolis also aimed to offer a comprehensive response to the environmental problems that were rapidly emerging as the consequences of urbanization and industrialization. The plan of Ecumenopolis involved a careful calculation of land distributions aimed at minimizing the footprint of the global city. The actual plan, although it remained sketchy, involved the reshuffling of population and the redistribution of resources—something which might of course work in paradise? The reason Doxiadis was able even to conceive of such possibilities was the existence at the time of a broadly shared, immense technocratic optimism which assumed that socio-cultural discontinuities (even of a global scale) would be managed away by architects, planners, and other experts.

The planetary city also promised to eradicate the excesses of the present—namely high-densities, extravagantly tall buildings, narcissistic signature designs, and technophilic utopias, for which Doxiadis had repeatedly professed disdain. Only by rejecting such formal excesses of Modernism, Doxiadis believed, could cities reclaim the physical qualities of past settlements that had achieved a balance between nature and society. In Doxiadis’s urban vision, the ecological demands were not tackled with sophisticated technologies (such as those suggested by Fuller, for example). It was not the enclosure of cities in domes or the proliferation of geoscope projects that constituted the architect’s ecological task, but rather, he believed, the selective recovery of lost physical qualities, their enlightened reorganization, and large-scale
dissemination. Like social problems, environmental concerns would be tackled through comprehensive management, not with advanced technology. Of course, Doxiadis's proposal also involved radical technological interventions—for the massive reshuffling of population, the new transportation networks, etc. Still, the resulting global settlement had a superficial low-tech familiarity consistent with Doxiadis's claims to managerial prudence.

Let me summarize. Despite its gargantuan scope, Ecumenopolis, at least in Doxiadis's mind, was actually seeking moderate solutions of sorts. Even as Doxiadis questioned Modernist practices, he remained committed to the benefits of scientific rationality. Even as he promoted urban industrialization, he attempted to temper its social and environmental impact. And even as he capitalized on Modernism's supranational concerns, he also considered local particularities. For all his emphasis on moderate solutions, however, Doxiadis too quickly embraced the technocratic dream of a post-political global society, without attention to the unequal geographies and social contours of urban growth. In the meantime, Doxiadis's zealous commitment to the benign possibilities of centralized management, and the astounding confidence that it was possible, concealed the limitations of his apolitical claims. Of course, the very fact that Doxiadis's projects were often interrupted by political events (military coups, displacement of governments, etc.) is a reminder of the impossibility of transcending politics.

The contradictions notwithstanding, Doxiadis's sharp focus on the physical environment did take into account the tensions between global development and local cultures in ways that could perhaps resist the now dominant views of globalization as a global monoculture of communication and information networks. Given the proliferation today of discourses and institutions devoted to development, the story of Ecumenopolis can help us enlarge the temporal dimension through which the topics of development and globalization can be analyzed.

Notes

1. Doxiadis's Athens-based firm (established in 1953) was famous for its distant well-organized campaigns around the globe. See for example, Christopher Rand, "The Ekistic World," The New Yorker (May 11, 1963): 49-87.


