



Track 6. Urban Change: Plans, Visions and Policies

Title: A Critical Analysis of the Concept of the World's Most Liveable City. Auckland: A Case Study

Author: Natalie Palmer

University of Auckland

natalie.palmer@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz

Abstract:

This paper interrogates the relationship between the concept of 'utopian fantasies' and the desire of cities to become the world's most liveable. Why do political figures paint a picture of a utopian vision for their city? This thesis challenges the reader to understand the 'fantasy' concept of the world's most liveable city.

It is argued that the global, capitalist order is producing networks of knowledge which have the same universal discourse for all western cities. Therefore, it is argued that the pursuit of the world's most liveable city is a 'sublime object of ideology' (Zizek, 1989, 1999). This is a concept which suggests that ideologies such as creating the world's most liveable city are beyond objective intelligibility. This builds on Kant's 'Critique of Judgment' written in 1790 (Kant in Bernard, 1951) which defines ideologies as not having limitations in terms of how majestic they can be, as opposed to something that has boundaries. However, this paper argues that the perception that something can be so majestic is a fallacy, because the most liveable city will mean different things to different people and will be unachievable in practice.

In the case of Auckland, the Mayor has set the Council the challenge of being recognised as the world's most liveable city. Liveability is measured by surveys such as that carried out by organisations such as Mercers. The argument advanced in this thesis, is that the Mayor's vision is a Lacanian 'utopian fantasy'. In other words, it is an unattainable, ideological, fantasy construct (Gunder and Hillier, 2009), which will not contribute towards recognising the diversity and the needs of the people of Auckland, particularly with regard to affordable living.

But is there a requirement for such a fantasy construct? On the one hand, a city can follow a vision to provide inspiration and increased certainty to residents. On the other, it can provide false hope and only serve to benefit certain sections of the community; for example the elites who dominate the overarching ideology, in this instance support for the neoliberal global order.

This paper proceeds to explore the dynamics of pursuing the vision for Auckland in three steps. One; to examine the underlying global neoliberal political order that has contributed to the push for cities to compete in terms of liveability. Two; to explore theories on creating a successful city, examining the criterion that organisations such as Mercers rely on when assessing liveability, and three; to understand the reasoning behind the pursuit of the world's most liveable city in terms of Lacan's concept of 'utopian fantasies' (1994).

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Introduction

The concept of a city that is the 'world's most liveable' is perpetuated by surveys such as The Economist Intelligence Unit Survey and Mercer's liveability surveys. Melbourne was voted as the world's most liveable city according to the Economist in 2011 (www.economist.com), and Vienna was Mercer's choice (www.mercer.com). Western cities generally aspire to achieve this accolade. But what makes a city liveable? And is this title a positive mandate for a city? The Auckland Council's mayor is advocating this for his city (Auckland Council, September 2011), but is it something that should be supported?

The main problem with this concept is the definition of liveability. It is clear from the above that two surveys can have totally different outcomes.

Oscar Wilde (Wilde, 1891, p28) famously stated "A map of the world which does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the country at which humanity is always landing". Wilde believed that the human spirit could only prosper and blossom in a utopian world. The writer opines that certain politicians certainly do try to land at this Utopia. This is clearly the intention of Auckland's Mayor in his pursuit of the world's most liveable city.

But where does the pursuit of this utopia come from? What are the underlying ideologies of the day? And is the model of the world's most liveable city worth pursuing?

The Underlying Ideology

Since the 1980s, and the advent of neoliberal politics, attitudes towards government have begun to change. 'Whereas government had often been looked to as a problem solver, it was now viewed as the problem (Chapin, 2012, p.10). The role of the public sector was seen to be inefficient, unable to sustain social welfare programmes, and the private sector and the market economy was viewed as the means to improve the economic situation. Capitalism and neoliberalism became the dominant ideology. As Jameson (Jameson, 2003, p.73) states 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'. Within the current, underlying neoliberal ideology, political agendas are embedded. In the case of Auckland, the Mayor's agenda is to pursue the accolade of becoming the world's most liveable city.

The writer opines that the focus of pursuing the world's most liveable city seems to be on capital accumulation, and not on affordable living, and equal access to services, for all residents. It is important to highlight the inadequacies of the neoliberal mantra of competing for most liveable city status, because it can lead to a focus away from providing affordable living options for those of lower socio-economic deciles. It can lead to a lack of social justice, and can also mislead people into believing that the pursuit of the vision of the world's most

liveable city will benefit them socially and economically. Individuals are susceptible to such visions.

This paper will argue that the concept of the world’s most liveable city is a Lacanian ‘utopian fantasy’ and that we accept these fantasies to obscure emptiness, or a lack of certainty within ourselves (Lacan, 1994). The reader is therefore challenged to deconstruct the concept of the world’s most liveable city, within the context of the dominant neoliberal ideology. This paper will analyse the concept of creating a liveable city, and will argue that this concept is pernicious. In particular, the criteria used to measure the attributes of a ‘liveable’ city by Mercers and The Economist will be discussed. This analysis will attempt to determine whether these criteria offer a realistic indication of a city’s liveability in the case of all socio-economic groups. The paper will then develop an argument to understand Auckland’s pursuit of the world’s most liveable city accolade in the context of Lacan’s concept of ‘utopian fantasies’. The research will also look at the work of Kant, Zizek and Gunder and Hillier (2009) in terms of the possible philosophical and psychological reasons for cities pursuing these fantasies, and why residents will support this objective. The theories analysed, are Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgement’ (In Bernard, 1951), Lacan’s (1994) concept of ‘utopian fantasies’, and Zizek’s (1989) ‘sublime object of ideology’. Finally, the paper will look at the city of Auckland as a case study.

Measuring Liveability

According to the annual Mercers’ World’s Most Liveable City survey, a city must score highly in terms of safety, education, hygiene, healthcare, recreation, political-economic stability and public transportation (www.mercer.com). The Economist survey (www.economist.com) concentrates on very similar criteria, but also focuses on the availability of goods and services, as well as business start ups. The cities scoring highly tend to be English speaking, the exception to this being the Swiss cities of Zurich and Geneva and the Austrian city of Vienna. These cities are mid-sized, have relatively low populations, and are wealthier cities.

In the writer’s view the criteria do not adequately address matters such as affordable housing and wider equality issues. The emphasis is on social stability, low crime rates, effective infrastructure, and enabling an economic environment conducive to business start ups. While these criteria have there place, it is argued, in accordance with the work of John Forester (Forester, 1989, p.4) that ‘publicly orientated planners need to worry...about decent outcomes; they need to worry not only about satisfied customers but also about the food, housing and jobs the perfect market promises and the actual market fails to provide’.

The cities that scored highly in 2011 were as follows:-

Table 1 – The Economist 2011 Survey

City	Ranking
<i>Melbourne</i>	1

<i>Vienna</i>	2
<i>Vancouver</i>	3

■ **Auckland was number 10**

Table 2 – Mercers 2011 Survey

City	Ranking
<i>Vienna</i>	1
<i>Zurich</i>	2
<i>Auckland</i>	3

Vancouver had consistently scored number one in the Economist survey over the past nine years, but it has been suggested that the riots that ensued after an ice hockey game in June 2011 (www.citymayors.com) led to its score on social stability being reduced, and therefore it lost out to Melbourne for the top spot. Therefore, one incident can reduce the ranking of a city, which makes the ratings seem quite fickle.

Auckland was scored as number 10 in the Economist survey and number 3 in the Mercers.

Cost of Living

Affordable living or the ‘cost of living’ is taken into consideration by the Mercers survey but only in the context of a US expatriates perception of affordability. The Mercers cost of living survey examines the relative strength or weakness of a given currency against the US dollar, and compares price movements of certain items over the ensuing twelve months to a New York guideline (www.mercer.com). This, the writer argues, offers a much skewed perception of the cost of living in a given city. It would be preferable to compare the price of goods to the average salary in the country in question and calculate the average percentage of an individual’s income which is spent on housing costs, rather than using a US expatriate baseline. This would provide a better idea of the liveability for those actually living in the city. Is this an indication, that despite the economic crisis in the US, it is still judged to be the benchmark against which other economies should be compared? It is argued that the US neoliberal model is the dominant underlying ideology of all western states. Subsequently, all cities are aiming to produce the same outcomes in terms of high GDP and economic growth. Planning theorists such as Susan Fainstein (2010) argue that the underlying global order is producing cities which are becoming identical. The writer opines that the global, capitalist order is producing networks of knowledge which have the universal discourse for all western cities. The lack of ideological difference in recent decades, according to Mishra, has been due to ‘the collapse of the socialist alternative, the globalisation of the economy and the relative decline of the nation state’ (Mishra, 1999, p.1), and it is argued that this has led to the rise of the post-political planning agenda.

The Post-Political

The post-political, as some commentators refer, seems to the writer to be a means for political figureheads struggling to make sense of the modern world, and trying to cling to an element of social justice, to modernise their political stance towards a capitalist standpoint, while appearing to hold true to their values. This post-political view, espoused by writers such as Ranciere (2006) has signalled the end of any truly democratic movements and has introduced post-democratic governmental techniques, which have reduced politics to mere social administration rather than representative involvement in the future direction of a city.

The move away from socialism has increasingly meant that the few who have control of capital have unfair access to positions of power and this 'spells a systematic distortion of the possibilities of all affected people coming to terms with events shaping their lives' (Gaventa, 1980, p.36). It is argued that capital controls the ideology of the day.

The Creative Class

Today, cities are the world are competing to be the most liveable, and they are also competing to attract key knowledge workers, or the 'creative class' as Richard Florida (Florida, 2002, p.80) refers to them, to generate wealth creation. Cities compete in this endeavour, and therefore wish to be viewed highly in terms of liveability. This, it appears, is a reaction to the uncertainty created by the neoliberal order. Due to the fact that 'multinationals are defined as being footloose, having the choice to move around the world (globalisation)... Seems to present a policy framework of passivity, fear and insecurity' (UNCTAD, 2001, p.4).

Therefore, strategies to attract corporations and skilled migrants are high on the political agenda. But what makes a city liveable and attractive to these businesses and individuals? And, more importantly, how are existing residents, particularly those of lower socio-economic status fairing when it comes to the pursuit of these neoliberal ideologies?

Utopian Fantasies

The writer suggests that the most 'liveable' city, without equality, is surely a fallacy, or what Lacan (1994) and other writers would term a 'utopian fantasy'. Zizek would describe such a utopian fantasy as a 'sublime object of ideology' (Zizek, 1989). This is a concept which suggests that ideologies such as creating the world's most liveable city are beyond objective intelligibility. This builds on Kant's 'Critique of Judgement', written in 1790, as translated in 1951 by Bernard, which defines ideologies as not having limitations in terms of majestic they can be, as opposed to something that has boundaries. The translation of Kant's work states that 'the sublime...is associated with limitlessness' (Kant in Bernard, 1951, p.90). He also speaks of an individual's addiction or 'Eigensucht' when believing in an ideal. The writer argues that the perception that something can be so majestic is a fallacy, because the most liveable city will mean different things to different people, and be unachievable in practice. It

is argued by Lacan (1994) and Žižek (1989) that we accept utopian fantasies because they serve to obscure emptiness, or a lack of certainty within us. Žižek has built on this, in his 2006 work, and infers that we all have an inherent need to make sense of the world. He states that we try to turn “disorder into order” into a “new harmony” (Žižek, 2006, p.37).

As Stravakakis suggests, a utopian fantasy allows us to experience a ‘promise, embodied in the object-cause of desire’ (Stravakakis, 2007, p.78). This promise helps to stave off feelings of emptiness associated with Anthony Giddens’ (1991) concept of ‘ontological security’, which is a ‘desire to be safe, secure and to have control over their environment’ (Gunder and Hillier, 2009, p.23). Lacan takes this concept one step further and argues that we are trying to replicate the maternal comfort that we experienced as a child, and are trying to recreate this by believing that the state has our best interests at heart and will strive to meet our needs (Lacan, 1994). Lavin presupposes that human nature is fearful of the future and states that ‘our most primal fear is the unknown; of this Thing that haunts us’ (Lavin, 2006, p.256). Therefore, politicians attempt to offer a guiding vision for their communities in order to provide some certainty. But does this provide residents with a false sense of security? The most liveable city is going to be the most liveable for whom? Whose interests will it serve? One utopian fantasy that individuals hold true is that the state ‘can be relied on to protect us’ (Gunder and Hillier, 2009, p.43). This concept can be pernicious, argues the writer. The current neoliberal global ideology which western cities pursue is based on capital accumulation and not economic redistribution. Therefore, the rich will get richer, and the poor, poorer.

Empty Signifiers

It could be said that the pursuit of liveability is a false promise or an ‘empty signifier’ as referred to by Laclau (Laclau, 1996, p.44). An empty signifier is a concept that is difficult to define, is not easily interpreted, and has no real meaning. Indeed, the concept of the world’s most liveable city will mean different things to different people, and therefore could be described as an empty signifier. Gunder and Hillier discuss planning concepts as empty signifiers in their work *Planning in Ten Words or Less*. The ‘contestable words’ (Gunder and Hillier, 2009, p.17) are ‘certainty, the good, risk, growth, globalisation, multiculturalism, sustainability, responsibility, rationality and planning itself’.

This paper would argue that ‘liveability’ could be added to this list as the eleventh key empty signifier in planning terms. Gunder and Hillier state:

“spatial planning practice performs a dialogue between planning and urban governance that is full of signifying terms and labelling buzzwords, or ‘weasel words’ as Watson (2004) terms them, many of which imply innovative means to achieve desired states of urban well-being, such as deploying ‘smart growth’, ‘new urbanism’ or ‘bohemian indexes’ to plan for ‘sustainable’, ‘globally competitive’, and ‘liveable’ cities. We (Gunder and Hillier) argue that these terms, and many others, are mere ‘empty signifiers’, meaning everything and nothing – comfort terms – all things to all people. These desirous states of living and being, which most of us would aspire

towards, and accordingly, attempt to shape our cities to achieve, are often illusions, attained, at best, with limited success” (Gunder and Hillier, 2009, p.1).

Auckland: A Case Study

The Auckland Mayor, Len Brown, is pursuing both a utopian and ideological vision in the pursuit of the world’s most liveable city for Auckland. The vision is set out as follows:

Auckland: The World’s Most Liveable City – A city where quality of life means every citizen has the opportunity to reach their potential (Auckland Plan Discussion Document, March 2011, p.56)

This vision, which sounds to be egalitarian on the surface, could be viewed as a tool to gain support for his political term. The pursuit of a popular vision in the Auckland Council planning policy documentation will create a sentiment that individuals cannot argue with. It is argued that pursuing the accolade of the world’s most liveable city through Auckland’s planning policy documents is meaningless, as what citizen wishes to live in the world’s most unliveable city. This vision therefore provides Auckland residents with a common, utopian goal.

The future of Auckland, following the amalgamation of the District Councils and the Regional Council, is unknown, but the pursuit of the world’s most liveable city gives residents something to aim for, for the time being, anyway. It could be argued through the work of Mouffe and Laclau and their assessment of Gramsci’s ideology that this vision would be subject to perpetual change. Mouffe and Laclau’s analysis of Gramsci’s concept of ‘the materiality of ideology’, specifically the fact that ideology is ‘an organic and rational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses’ (Mouffe and Laclau, 1985, p67) is subject to Gramsci’s conclusion that ‘nothing in history, in social life, nothing is fixed, rigid or definitive. And nothing ever will be’ (Gramsci in Mouffe and Laclau, 1985, p.31). Therefore, this vision could only be applicable to the Mayor’s term in office. Another politician might favour a different direction for Auckland in future. Also, expanding on comments from Beattie (2010) shouldn’t Auckland Council be concentrating on implementing its legacy visions and strategies? It is argued that it would be preferable to work with the current policy structure and implement it well, rather than creating a new policy structure. As Beattie (Beattie, 2010, p.3) states ‘the biggest problem facing urban planning is not a need to create even more plans but our inability to implement the existing plans’.

The writer would like to point out potential pitfalls, incorporated in the emerging planning policy documentation, which in the writer’s view are premised on fallacies. These relate to economic growth and housing projections and the affordable housing issue.

Results

The draft Auckland Plan sets an ‘annual real GDP increase of between 5.1% and 6.2%’ (Draft Auckland Plan, September 2011, p.80). This is when real growth for Auckland, over the past

two years, stands at around 1%. In 2010, growth of 0.93% was recorded on the Council's website (www.aucklandcity.govt.nz).

Therefore, this target would appear to be unachievable in the current economic climate, and its inclusion in the draft plan could be viewed as a way to mask the economic reality. Economic growth of 1% per annum would be more realistic. In terms of housing projections the draft plan proposes to provide 300,000 new dwellings, most within the existing metropolitan urban limit. The draft proposes to accommodate these dwellings through the intensification of only 6,000 hectares of Greenfield land (Draft Auckland Plan, September 2011, p.31), 70% within the metropolitan urban limit and 30% outside this boundary. This, in the writer's view, appears to be the utilisation of very little Greenfield land unless all of these households reside in apartments. The following table gives an idea of how the tenure of dwellings could be proportioned:-

Table 3 – Number of Hectares of Land Required to Accommodate Housing Projections in Draft Auckland Plan

Minimum Lot Size/Housing Type	Hectares Required (Ha)
1,000m ² lot size/low intensity suburban living – detached housing 10 dwellings per hectare	30,000ha
667m ² lot size/medium intensity suburban living – detached housing 15 dwellings per hectare	20,000ha
400m ² lot size/medium intensity city living – townhouses 25 dwellings per hectare	12,000ha
200m ² lot size/mid-rise apartment city living 50 dwellings per hectare	6,000ha
100m ² lot size/high-rise apartment city living 100 dwellings per hectare	3,000ha

The provision of mid-rise apartment living will do little to offer choice to residents and affordable, family housing, unless the Council adopts affordable housing policies such as those utilised in the UK and other parts of Europe. The draft Auckland Plan recognises that

there are ‘pockets of extreme deprivation’ (Draft Auckland Plan, September 2011, p.7) and goes on to state that ‘housing has become increasingly unaffordable, and many Aucklanders face significant housing stress’ (Draft Auckland Plan, September 2011, p.13). However, it is argued that the draft plan has advocated little to try to alleviate this situation.

The affordable housing problem is of high magnitude, and has been recognised by central government. The New Zealand Productivity Commission in a draft report, dated December 2011, found that house prices in Auckland were considered higher than the national average. The report states that ‘the distribution of house prices in Auckland vis-à-vis the rest of the country increased by over 260% in real terms between 1995 and 2006’ (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2011, p.1).

The average house price in Auckland is \$490,000 (taken from www.crockers.co.nz) and the national New Zealand median price index is \$350,000 (taken from www.globalpropertyguide.com).

The Commission are currently undertaking an inquiry into housing affordability in New Zealand, so clearly there is a real issue that needs to be addressed. It is suggested that if Auckland is to become the world’s most liveable city, then it will require some decisive action in terms of future planning policy for affordable housing.

Summary of Results

This paper looked at the underlying neoliberal global order which supports the concept of the World’s Most Liveable City; the leading liveability surveys produced by Mercers and The Economist in 2011; and post-political theories such as Lacan’s ‘utopian fantasies’ and Laclau’s ‘empty signifiers’. The examination of the concept of the World’s Most Liveable City has found it to be a fallacy, lacking in substance. Each survey of liveability will produce a different result dependent on the assessment criteria applied. This neoliberal spatial governance model, which is being adopted by western cities, is premised on over-optimistic assumptions. This is evident in the analysis of Auckland, and in particular the emerging Council spatial plan. The writer opines that Auckland cannot be the World’s Most Liveable City if it is deficient in the provision of housing stock and has set unrealistic growth projections that the city cannot achieve.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has found that the pursuit of the World’s Most Liveable City is a result of the dominance of the underlying neoliberal global order and its emphasis on wealth creation. It is a political manoeuvre to attract business and skilled migrants.

The leading liveability surveys, the Mercers and The Economist assessments, generate different results depending on the given assessment criteria. Therefore, this suggests that there is no accurate assessment of liveability.

It is therefore considered that the pursuit of the world's most liveable city is both a Lacanian, utopian fantasy construct and a Laclauian empty signifier, with no real meaning, which provides residents with false hope for the future of their city. In the case of Auckland, the Mayor's vision and the planning policy direction which the Council are pursuing through the Auckland Plan seem very ambitious, and it is considered, by the writer, that Auckland Council should adopt a more socially just vision which incorporates more realistic objectives such as more achievable economic growth and housing projections.

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