

Big Plans

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“Tutto il mondo è paese,” “all the world is a village”: I had this Italian proverb in mind during my interview with Rohit Aggarwala, director of the New York City Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability. In discussing with Aggarwala PlaNYC, the ambitious project for New York City that he is overseeing, it became clear to me how similar social, economic, and environmental issues are central to an urban debate that is now thoroughly global. A new kind of politics has emerged in recent years, one whose focus is increasingly on cities and their government. Mayors have become key political actors in confronting global urban challenges and building alliances for global solutions. The new urban challenge is clear: as a UN report recently showed, by the end of 2008 half of the world's 6.7 billion population will live in urban areas. PlaNYC was unveiled by Mayor Michael Bloomberg on April 22 (Earth Day) 2007. The project is a compilation of 127 initiatives that aim to render New York a sustainable metropolis by the year 2030. The goals of the plan are impressive: they include creating housing for almost a million more people; planting a million trees throughout the five boroughs; expanding and improving the transit infrastructure; reducing the city's energy consumption. The most debated initiative was congestion pricing, the decision to charge a fee to vehicles entering Manhattan below 60th street. The political battle for congestion pricing lasted almost a year. The Mayor championed tirelessly the initiative's goals: reduce traffic, generate revenue for the city, and improve air quality and quality of life in general. Much of the battle was fought on the media, especially in the editorial pages of newspapers: in July 2007, for example, Ken Livingstone, then Mayor of London, endorsed the initiative in a *New York Times* op-ed piece titled “Clear Up the Congestion-Pricing Gridlock.” Ultimately, however, the initiative died still-born: in April 2008 it was approved by the New York City Council, but it was never endorsed by the New York State Assembly, which refused to even vote on it; the expiration of a deadline for receiving US federal funds eventually put an end to the initiative. A year ago, congestion pricing seemed a win-win solution. New York politics proved it otherwise. The battle over congestion pricing revealed how the project of

environmental sustainability is ultimately a question of competing constituencies and interests, a decision over priorities, a political matter. Planning (urban and environmental) is not, or not only, a technical issue for problem solvers. No matter how low our carbon emissions are or how small our environmental footprint is, the toughest challenges for the urban age remain the questions of social justice and the right to the city.

Through your work in City government in the past years you had a vantage view point to New York's condition. What have you discovered and how do you think New York will cope with the incumbent economic mess?

New York is coming out of a generational crisis. Today the city is fundamentally healthy. The recession we are currently experiencing is hardly comparable to a crisis. A crisis was when a million people moved out of the city in the space of eight years, between 1970 and 1978. That's when you no longer have the tax base, when not only the people, but the jobs, the economic activity, in some cases even the cultural institutions, are fleeing and then you get into a deadly spiral. You no longer have the money to maintain your infrastructure or to buy the services, so it becomes less attractive to live here and more people choose to leave. For thirty years New York was digging itself out. By the early 2000s people came to believe that there is no reason New York should not be completely safe, no reason to believe that living in New York meant that you had to accept unpleasant public areas, poor public services, or for that matter unresponsive government. People's standards increased and that was a sign of fundamental strength.

Acknowledging this strength led you to conceive and launch PlaNYC?

New York actually had a tradition of long-term thinking about its future, a tradition we lost in the 1970s. Long-term plans started with the 1811 street grid and went all the way to the last plan for New York done by Mayor Lindsay [in the late 1960s]. Just think about it, one of the most important urban planning decisions in the history of the United States was the decision to build the subway. It was explicitly designed to unlock this incredibly overpopulated part of Lower Manhattan and allow it to use the whole region. Within the space of fifteen or twenty years

it did. Manhattan emptied out, Lower Manhattan emptied out into upper Manhattan, into Queens into the Bronx, only because of the decision to expand the subway system, which was a decision taken by the City of New York. So we had this tradition and we lost it in the 1970s because we were hand to mouth, because we were worried about survival, not about long-term stability or growth. And of course, ironically the same thing happened to us in 2001, so we had this great run, we had a population record for the first time in twenty years in 2000, and then the 9/11 attacks forced us once again to think about the next day rather than the next generation. By 2005 New York had stabilized: between 2000 and 2005 the city grew by a hundred and some thousand people and that got us thinking about the long-term future.

Which were the cities and plans to which you looked at in attempting to revive this tradition?

We've looked all over the place and London in many respects is the city most comparable to New York; there are ideas in the plan that relate to traffic congestion pricing inspired from London. We looked at how great rapid bus transit works for Paris and how bicycles work in Copenhagen. We've learned about energy efficiency not only from Europe but also from California and Vermont. Don't forget that a place to look at for transportation is the current world leading investor of the sector, China. So there are all sorts of places that inspired different ideas. It's not so much though that you can look to them for implementation. There are, if you will, three levels: the vision, the technical execution, and the implementation. There is what you want to have, that is the vision, and big cities despite their differences can learn from each other. There are the very small details where you also have a lot you can share, like the technical challenges of putting up a congestion pricing charge reader. When you get beyond that, the political implementation is completely different. You have very different traditions of how people make decisions and how they expect to be involved in their government.

PlaNYC was launched on Earth Day 2007 and you just celebrated the first year anniversary. What progress has been achieved?

One way to look at the “one year

report” is the interrelation of having a vision for things that you can control and having a vision for things that you cannot control. Where we’ve made the greatest progress in the first year are the places that we had the greatest control over. We don’t have to ask anybody’s permission to have the authority to plant a tree. So we’ve been able to plant 57,000 trees in just one and a half planting seasons. We’ve been able to completely transform the taxi industry with rules that will take effect later this year and require hybrid cars. We created rules that will facilitate the adoption of efficient natural gas micro-turbines in buildings. That’s a major step forward for which we worked with the Buildings and the Fire Department. We’ve had a lot of success working with the City Council. They endorsed congestion pricing, entrained our carbon targets into law, and confirmed our process for developing a storm water management plan. These are all things that we were able to do on the local level, either because the Mayor himself could have control or because of a very good working relationship with the City Council. Where have we fallen behind? Congestion pricing, that is not in the City’s hands, and on energy, where we made less progress than what I would have liked, because the regulation of the energy supply market and the legal authority to raise funds for energy efficiency both reside with the State Public Service Commission. We therefore haven’t had as much success on things that we do not control.

Which are the biggest challenges for architects and development within the frame of PlaNYC? How do they come into play, for instance, with all these mega-projects happening now in New York and their inevitable impact to a plan for sustainability?

A lot of people talk about mega-projects as bad. We have to think that there are mega-projects that weren’t designed well, that weren’t smart. Mega-projects often shield a willingness to take a risk and what is amazing is that when you get a really good mega-project, nobody thinks of it as mega. Once at a lecture somebody was talking about how much they hated mega-projects, how much they hated Atlantic Yards, and how terrible it was what the Bloomberg Administration was trying to do in the West Side of Manhattan, and it was all awful and we had to do

small scale building lot size development. When this person was asked: “So, what’s your favorite part of New York City?” the response was actually Rockefeller Center. Now, one cannot imagine a project more mega than Rockefeller Center—I forget how many square blocks it is, it’s massive, it was done by the private sector only for profit, but it was done so well that we think about it as being part of our urban fabric. So the real challenge is, I guess, for architects to ask themselves what are they designing for? Bad mega-projects often are beautiful models. We are a little more nostalgic now about the World Trade Center, but a lot of people hated it as an urban design, it looks great as a model and in pictures but the plaza wasn’t actually that attractive. We don’t necessarily think about Rockefeller Center as it looks in the model because it’s got a lot of skyscrapers around and you can’t really take an aerial picture of it easily, but we all know what the tree looks like and what the streetscape looks like. I think architects have it in their power not to let themselves get carried away with the building as sculpture but really to focus on the street level experience and how that building looks to the human eye.

How come they didn’t put a city planner to lead PlaNYC?

Because PlaNYC is not a plan in a way that a city planner thinks about a plan and this is an important distinction. A plan traditionally is about where you are going to put what. The city plan is about zoning and height and this use and not that use and this line runs here. PlaNYC in some ways is the other meaning of “to plan.” To plan could mean to put on a zoning map. To plan also means to figure out what to do ahead of when you need to do it, and that’s what PlaNYC is about. It’s about saying we’ve seen what we are going to face twenty, thirty years from now. What can we do in between now and then? Some of which we’ll do tomorrow, some of which we’ll have to do over two decades to ensure that that future is better than it might otherwise be. It’s a very different thing from city planning. In some ways I wonder if we misnamed it—it should have been AgendaNYC or StrategyNYC. I think a lot of people in the planning community have misunderstood this plan. City planning or city plans do not really take into account air quality, hybrid taxis, or the water system, not in the way that we are. Nor do they take

into account questions of congestion pricing or fundraising. The city plan does not include the financing vehicle, it’s two separate things, which is in part why this office is not part of the Department of City Planning. What we are trying to do is to figure out the long-term strategy for New York. It’s a whole different thing than a city plan.

Twenty-two more years to go for 2030 and the Bloomberg Administration is approaching its end, where do we go from here?

We would like to see a law passed that would require there to be an Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability. We have a fair amount of support in the City Council for this, so I am hopeful that it will become law. We can champion certain things, we don’t control the State Legislature, but we can try to champion certain bills. What I think we’ve done so far is to set an agenda for what the city needs to do, and I think we’ve helped New Yorkers talk differently about priorities. Going a year and a half back you didn’t hear people talking about congestion and transit financing as critical city priorities. And I think now those priorities and, in general, the environment, are back on the radar. What we need to think now is how to ensure that the ideas we put forward will continue to get implemented, and there are only three things we can do: get as much done as possible before we leave; start a process of reporting our progress every year as we did the other day with the first annual progress report; and third, frankly, is the fact that we worked with the public and that 150 advocacy organizations endorsed the plan. The problem with democracy is that you get the government you deserve. If New Yorkers want the next mayoral candidates to talk about what they are going to do about the plan, or maybe they have better ideas than what is in the plan, if they are going to ask them about congestion, air quality, energy, carbon emissions, etc., then fine. You know, one way or another this will continue whether it’s our specific ideas or of somebody who the public thinks has a better idea, but at least the problem will be solved. If the public doesn’t ask these questions, if people are distracted by whatever politicians want to drum up out of resentment or fear or greed or whatever, then it will not.

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