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OPINION

IN MEDIAS RES:

The environmental case for the urbanite

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Too many cities exist as the antithesis to the natural world. This false dichotomy causes the environmentalist to often be imagined as one who seeks to abandon the modern urban structure. Instead, they are thought to embrace a mindset that argues for a sustainable lifestyle which can only be fulfilled through a secluded life in a fantastical wilderness. In this reverie, the environmentalist is defined not by their impact on the world, but their withdrawal from it.

The narrative is tempting to embrace — in our collective consciousnesses, urbanism can seem inherently tied to the problems encompassing our society. Capitalism, urban renewal and class inequities all seem synonymous to city life.

Cities, however, possess a remarkable aptitude towards defining a sustainable future. While urban areas account for roughly three-quarters of global greenhouse gas emissions, much of that footprint comes from sprawling, car-dependent developments at the urban periphery. This dramatic inequality is a result of the suburban sprawl that has come to dominate much of the world’s urban planning, particularly in the United States.

The resulting increase in transportation-related emissions and resource-intensive individual housing is a major driver of the large carbon footprint of urban living. When considered on their own, densely settled city systems possess the ability to solve or mitigate many of these issues. An ideal city provides both public transportation and walkable amenities, diminishing the need for

personal transportation in everyday life. Apartment-style living allows resources to be shared across multiple units, using comparatively less materials in construction than suburban units that would accommodate the same number of people.

Of course, reality often means the benefits of these “ideal cities” are nowhere to be seen. The environmental benefits of cities aren’t automatic and require careful policymaking to unlock. Cities such as Phoenix,

Paris, Milan and Barcelona, focuses on human needs over vehicular wants. The plan emphasizes easy access to daily necessities and services such as grocery stores, schools, healthcare and parks by placing them within a 15-minute walk or bike ride from residential areas. This model also serves to reduce other issues presently associated with city life, including inequitable access to green

Boston and New York City, are beginning to explore these 15-minute friendly initiatives. If successful, these programs may see future adoption by other cities. For resources outside the 15-minute radius, sustainable transportation options have been proposed to fill the gaps. Electric public transit options, such as bus and rail, have already been adopted across the world, and fill this niche in sustainability.

It is tempting to argue that humanity does not

can romanticize off-grid living or the rural lifestyle, dense cities provide housing, services and jobs with lower per-capita resource use. For those outside the upper class, sustainable urban environments will quickly become vital to securing a livable future in the Anthropocene.

Providing for cities is not just an environmental initiative, but social justice reform. A sustainable city that provides walkable amenities allows for gaps in healthcare and nutrition to be closed — a class and race issue many current cities face. A metropolis that replaces unnecessary automobile infrastructure with parks and green spaces can begin to address disparities in access to clean air and recreation. A planning committee that expands and electrifies its public transportation can reduce related air pollution in minority neighborhoods that currently bear a disproportionate share of environmental burdens.

The environmental movement has spent too long considering how humanity might escape the evils of modern life and not enough time considering how that modern life may be made more sustainable. The environmentalist must be as at home in the city as they are in the woods; the urbanite must be as connected to the natural world on the streets of Brooklyn as they are in the expanses of Yellowstone. To pursue life in the city and to seek actual improvement in its policy and daily life is as drastically important for the future of the world as any other climate initiative currently pursued by environmentalists. Only by coming to this realization can the environmental movement begin to work towards achieving a future that is both livable and sustainable.



LOGO BY COLBI LORANGER, ASSOCIATE ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Arizona and New Haven, Connecticut are often criticized for their comparative lack of efficient public transportation, walkable amenities and housing that is both affordable and up-to-standard. These failings, however, signify only a lapse in sustainable policy as opposed to a system in need of abandonment.

Already, the blueprints for this needed sustainable renewal exist. The “15 minute city,” popularized by European urban centers such as

spaces and “food deserts.”

In the US, the possibilities of such models were largely abandoned after the passing of both the Federal Housing Act of 1949 and the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. These policies removed walkable amenities and dense, mixed-use housing in favor of automobile dependency and suburban sprawl in city planning.

Urban areas such as

“need” cities but this mindset is ultimately false. Like it or not, cities represent humanity’s future. Around 58% of the world population, comprising 4.8 billion people, call cities home. By 2050, this number is expected to increase by 2.5 billion. Simply put, there will not be enough land for the world to engage in its off-grid fantasies. The abandonment of city infrastructure is a luxury, not a realistic environmental solution for a growing world. While wealthier people