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'Seeing Like a State: why certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed'

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Overview:

Looking back over the 20th century one can see many examples of utopian schemes which have inadvertently brought disruption where they were intended to improve lives. Prof Scott argues that these large scale schemes, such as the rationalisation of forestry or the planning of a whole city, fail because they attempt to impose an inappropriate order upon complex interdependencies which they do not fully understand. The acknowledgement of local knowledge and experience is as important as the formal and the abstract in addressing the challenges which cities now face.

Key ideas:

- **Jane Jacobs (1916-2006):** An American-born writer and activist on urban matters. She is best known for her 1961 book 'The Life and Death of Great American Cities' in which she develops a powerful critique of 1950s urban renewal policies, proposing mixed use development based around the spontaneous inventiveness of the small and individual, rather than the abstract plans of governments and corporations. Her ideas had widespread influence outside of urban planning and together with the work of Rachel Carson came to define the spirit of the early sixties.
- **Rachel Carson (1907-1964):** An American marine biologist and nature writer and pioneer of the environmental movement. Her 1962 book 'Silent Spring' examined the impact of agrochemicals on wildlife.
- **Le Corbusier (1887-1965):** A Swiss born architect and urbanist famous for his contributions to what is now known as modern architecture. The nature of his contribution to architecture and urban planning is hotly contested in professional circles.
- **Modern architecture:** a term used to describe a building and planning style dating from the early 20th century whose main characteristics include the simplification of form and the elimination of decoration. It gained popularity after WWII and became the dominant architectural style for many buildings for three decades. At its most extreme it has been criticised for lacking a human scale.
- **Vernacular knowledge:** a way of knowing which is built upon local experience and perspective derived from a lived point of view.
- **Official knowledge:** a way of knowing which is built upon abstract understanding often used for a singular purpose and seldom from a local point of view

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Summary:

Prof Scott introduced his thesis by reference to a number of examples which described the difference between vernacular and official knowledge. These included among others:

- the difference between local highway names which told you where a road went (e.g. Durham Road) and official names which attribute a unique identification number (e.g. Route 77) to a road which only makes sense in a map which contains many other roads;
- the development of surnames by the state in 17th century Britain;
- Turkish telephone books started with first names until the 1920's, Thai ones till the 1950's and they still do in Bangkok.

Peasant measures of land are based on function (e.g. a two-cow farm) which would vary in size according to the quality of the land and the state measure (acres, hectares) which are fixed in size and more convenient for tax purposes. The latter makes little sense to the peasant and is like telling an academic that he has inherited ten kilos of books! It is designed for the administrative convenience of the state and its need to tax.

His most extensive example was that of the development of scientific forestry in Germany in the 18th century. In order to tax effectively the state focussed its efforts on the extent of timber and firewood production which neglects the many other aspects of the forest – flora and fauna, bark, sap, fungi, etc. In developing this method the German state devised a census of trees based on standard sizes and the systematic growing of trees in a monocultures forest of linear planting designed to maximise revenue. This form of forestry based on official knowledge was widely adopted before it was understood to have disastrous consequences for forests and their ecologies.

Prof Scott moved on to discuss the difference between vernacular cities and planned cities. The former, he suggested, arose out of the myriad actions of many thousands of people going about their daily lives and the latter from a pre-conceived all encompassing plan. He suggested medieval Bruges as an example of the first and Chicago's network of right angled streets of the second. The former requires good local knowledge or a guide to navigate; the latter is easily understood by outsiders who can count and remember the names of US presidents as the streets are all named in this way. He suggested that a most extreme proponent of this type of city planning was Le Corbusier, who developed a plan for the reconstruction of almost every city in the world even although he did not realise any of these in their entirety.

Prof Scott used Le Corbusier's plan for Buenos Aires as an example. The favoured views are from the sea and it is built to be seen from outside and above – as a kind of sculpture, not from the perspective of who inhabits its streets. It bears no relation to the order of everyday life of those who live on the ground. He then contrasted plans for Brasilia with sections of Rio de Janeiro and San Paolo highlighting differences in the human scale and content the vernacular city and the inhuman scale and content of the planned city in streets, residences and public spaces. He said that the scale of Brasilia had engendered an illness known as 'Brasilitis' – depression brought on by living in Brasilia. He also suggested that the city only worked at all because of the unplanned sectors constructed to house the constructions workers who were all supposed to leave

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on completion of the city but stayed. This group, not envisaged in the plan, provided essential services which made life in the city tolerable at all.

The work of Jane Jacobs was then discussed. Prof Scott suggested this was similar in many respects to that of Rachel Carson; both were outsiders commenting on the impact of modernism in various aspects of life. Jacobs practiced what Scott called the sociology of everyday life on the streets and suggested that working order was more important for a good city than visual order; while the intestines of a rabbit look messy, they do a good job of keeping the rabbit alive. In direct contrast to Le Corbusier's segregation of city districts according to function, Carson suggested, as early as 1961, the idea of mixed use districts and observed that human scale environments encourage many different kinds of interaction and convenience which make places more desirable.

In concluding, Prof Scott used the idea of Métis, or local knowledge, as a way of addressing key issues in city (and human) development. He used several examples to support this perspective, including indigenous knowledge of natural medicines in a forest. He suggested some 'rules of thumb' to approach the art of locality and experience which he hoped would be helpful. These can be summarised as:

- Be aware that every intervention has the potential to be an intrusion and is likely to raise strong feelings among the experts who live where you are attempting to plan.
- Assume you start from ignorance; turn up as a curious learner.
- The next 25 years are uncertain so work accordingly and embrace this uncertainty.
- Take small steps based on embodied knowledge (e.g. Japanese water engineers will live by a water course for a year or two before making any attempt to work on it).
- Make sure your actions are reversible without too much damage.
- The first law of tinkering is to keep all the parts!
- Expect surprises and change.
- Make so that people can improvise on your intentions or, better still, fully engage them from the beginning so they have the chance to reject your ideas and come up with something more suitable for their lives.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.