

The end of cities:

Erwin Anton Gutkind and the inevitability of decentralisation and dispersal

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Abstract

During a career that spanned six decades, the architect, planner and historian Erwin Anton Gutkind consistently argued for the abandonment of the concept of the city and for the emergence of a new form of environmental organisation where communities lived in settlements that did not stand in a hierarchical relationship to one another. Such an ‘expanding environment’, to be achieved through the decentralisation and dispersal of settlements and people, would allow for a rejuvenation of the relationship between individuals, communities and their environment and herald the beginning of a new post-urban era in human history. To Gutkind, this new era was not only desirable but inevitable, as it aligned with contemporary understandings of the nature of an expanding universe. This article aims to provide an overview of Gutkind’s little-known work in planning on decentralisation, dispersal and the end of cities. It will argue that, even though many of Gutkind’s utopian ideas concurred with those of his contemporaries, the way in which he combined them into a complex argument, drawing on his practical experiences and a range of disciplinary perspectives, was truly his own and remains worthy of consideration in a time of continued interest in the growth, ‘liveability’ and sustainability of cities.

Keywords: Erwin Anton Gutkind; cities; planning; decentralisation; dispersal; expanding environment; universe

‘For me, and many like-minded people, the twilight of cities is a fact, and I cannot convince myself that it is possible or useful to revive something that is dead, namely, the city’.¹

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, European and North American architects and planners have repeatedly called for new forms of environmental organisation that focused on regional communities rather than cities. Faced with a multitude of problems caused by the process of mass urbanisation (including congestion, pollution and suburban sprawl), the decentralisation of cities and the dispersal of communities and industries across larger regions were frequently identified as means by which new, more ‘liveable’ settlement forms could be achieved.² One of the most vocal and prolific proponents of decentralisation and dispersal was the architect, planner and historian Erwin Anton Gutkind. During a career that spanned six decades, Gutkind repeatedly argued for the abandonment of the concept of the city and for the emergence of a new form of environmental organisation where communities lived in settlements that did not stand in a hierarchical relationship to one another. Despite Gutkind’s many publications on the topic, however, and notwithstanding the fact that he was well-acquainted with many of the key regionalist thinkers of the time (including Lewis Mumford), his work today remains curiously little known.

The aim of this article is to rectify this situation by providing an overview of Gutkind’s work on decentralisation, dispersal and the end of cities. The article will argue that, even though his ideas in many ways reflected those of the times, his unique personal background, his long and diverse career (as both a practitioner and theoretician) and the academic breadth and grounding of his writings, make it difficult to categorise Gutkind as

¹ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 151.

² Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*; Schubert, “The Neighbourhood Paradigm”; Ward, *Planning the Twentieth-Century City*; Lefaivre and Tzonis, *Architecture of Regionalism*; Conn, *Americans Against the City*.

simply another exponent of the ‘anti-urban’ movement of the twentieth century.³ Drawing on the work of architects, planners, philosophers, sociologists and astronomers, to name but a few, Gutkind’s utopian argument was complex and ultimately, one may argue, in the unique way it combined those various perspectives, his own. At the same time, although the core of his argument was remarkably persistent throughout his career, it did evolve over time, as did the way in which he approached it; from decentralisation and dispersal as a practical necessity to a theoretical inevitability. Ultimately, then, this article aims to draw attention to the work and contribution of a generally known, but curiously overlooked architect, planner and historian; while, in doing so, it also intends to contribute to recent discourses on the dynamic plurality of ‘anti-urban’ writings.

The need for a ‘revolution of environment’

In 1936, Erwin Anton Gutkind published a review of Le Corbusier’s *La Ville Radieuse* in *The Architectural Review*.⁴ It was Gutkind’s second publication in English, published soon after he arrived in London, where he had finally settled in 1935 having left his native Germany almost immediately after Hitler’s rise to power. Having been a member of the modernist avant-garde in Berlin during the late 1920s and early 1930s, Gutkind began his review in an unsurprisingly positive manner, applauding Le Corbusier’s innovative architectural propositions.⁵ But the tone of the review soon changed, when he noted that Le Corbusier’s proposals for the renewal of the city centres of Paris, Buenos Aires and Rome would nonetheless ‘(...) only be, even in the best cases, a slum clearance in the most sublime form’.⁶ Although he did not reject the need for urban renewal in itself (‘Not at all!’ Why

³ Conn, *Americans Against the City*.

⁴ Gutkind, “The Indivisible Problem.”

⁵ Grabow, “The Outsider”; Hierl, *Erwin Gutkind*; Oberländer, *Der Aufbruch in die Moderne*.

⁶ Gutkind, “The Indivisible Problem.” 172.

should not the centre of Paris be cleared and rebuilt according to the plans of Le Corbusier? The sooner the better!’), Gutkind took issue with Le Corbusier’s exclusive focus on the problems of the city.⁷ Such a focus, he argued, would not be sufficient to address the wider social, economic and architectural difficulties of the day. What should be the focus of the discipline of planning, he argued, was not the improvement of towns and cities, but the relationship of those towns and cities to their regional hinterlands. The problem, for Gutkind, was thus not the contemporary practice of planning itself; nor was it the radical nature of individual projects such as le Corbusier’s La Ville Radieuse. Rather it was their limited urban scope. By looking only at what happened in the cities and by concentrating purely on how to resolve urban difficulties, a balanced approach to the problems of both town and country could not be achieved. ‘We must demand’, Gutkind concluded, ‘the replacement of “La Ville Radieuse” by “La Totalité Du Pay Radieux”’.⁸

Although the review constituted the first English publication in which Gutkind put forward his ideas about the need for a new relationship between town and country, it was by no means the first time he broached the subject; nor, indeed, would it be the last. While working as a successful practicing architect in Berlin, Gutkind had already written about the issue a number of times.⁹ After he moved to the United Kingdom, where he gave up his architectural practice and managed to establish himself as a freelance planner, researcher and writer, he frequently returned to the theme, dedicating various articles and books to the subject.¹⁰ But although always starting from the same premise (the need for a planning approach that targeted the problems of town and country alike), those publications in time expanded on this theme, becoming more theoretical, radical and utopian, and more concerned

⁷ Gutkind, “The Indivisible Problem.” 172.

⁸ Gutkind, “The Indivisible Problem.” 172-173.

⁹ Gutkind, *Neues Bauen*; Gutkind, “Bilanz.”

¹⁰ In particular: Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*; Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*; Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*; and Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*.

with the relationship between humans and their environment in general. Rather than calling for a renewed balance between town and country, Gutkind in time began to argue for the abandonment of both, for the end of the concepts of a city and countryside and for the emergence of a new form of environmental organisation where communities lived in regions that had no centres and that did not stand in a hierarchical relationship to one another. When, at the age of 70, he moved to the USA to begin working on his monumental *magnum opus* the *International History of City Development* (Gutkind 1964-1972), Gutkind had in essence ‘turned his back on the city’ altogether.¹¹ ‘Cities as we have known them in the past cannot survive’, he concluded in *The Twilight of Cities*; ‘Something new has to be worked out’.¹²

When reviewing Gutkind’s entire written oeuvre, it is clear that he pursued this line of thought ‘with a single-minded determination’ and seemingly unperturbed by the concerns and criticisms voiced by colleague planners (the ‘realists’, in Gutkind’s own words) who considered him ‘an anomaly’, ‘impossibly utopian’, ‘out of step’ and ‘antithetical to the social psychology of planning theory’.¹³ His ideas emerged from his experiences of working as an architect and planner, and as a member of the government agencies involved with the reconstruction of Germany after World Wars I and II. In combination with an extensive reading of works of literature, history, planning, sociology, philosophy, astronomy and architecture, those practical experiences convinced him of the worth and relevance of his ideas. The key planning instruments that he identified to achieve the ‘revolution of environment’ that he envisioned (a radically different way of relating communities to one another and to their environment) were decentralisation and dispersal. Decentralisation, for Gutkind, consisted of a process of ‘loosening up’ of urban districts that had to be combined with dispersal, a geographical spreading out of people across a region, in order to be

¹¹ Gutkind, *International History*; Lewis Mumford, quoted in Grabow, “The Outsider.” 208.

¹² Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 65.

¹³ Grabow, “The Outsider.” 200-210.

meaningful. Only the combination of both would lead to an ‘expanding environment’ where the antagonism between town and country would disappear and where there would no longer be a need for ‘the traditional role of the city as an all-absorbing centre’.¹⁴ To Gutkind, such a revolution of environment was not only desirable or necessary; it was inevitable.

The practicalities of decentralisation and dispersal

Born in Berlin in 1886, Gutkind formed part of the illustrious generation of German architects who influenced the twentieth century with their ideas about new and ‘modern’ forms of architecture and urban design (Figure 1). Early on in his career, his ideas about decentralisation and dispersal were already taking form. In 1919, six years after achieving his PhD and while working as an advisor for the Ministry of Labour (*Reichsarbeitsministerium*), he edited one of the first publications on this ‘New Building’ movement entitled *Neues Bauen: Grundlagen zur Praktischen Siedlungstätigkeit*.¹⁵ The aim of the book was to discuss the way in which modern ways of building could contribute to the reconstruction of Germany after World War I. As noted in the foreword by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Adolf Scheidt, the focus of the book was on the practicalities of reconstruction. In the introduction, Gutkind identified a population move from the city to the countryside as one of the imminent demographic changes facing post-war Germany. In order to be prepared for this internal migration, new housing should be built in the countryside. The existing rural housing, he noted, was so ‘extraordinarily inadequate’ that it could hardly be taken serious.¹⁶ At the same time, however, it was also necessary to decentralise the cities by developing ‘garden city-like’ settlements, where high-quality new houses with gardens would make it

¹⁴ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 150.

¹⁵ Gutkind, *Neues Bauen*.

¹⁶ Gutkind, *Neues Bauen*, 9.

possible for workers to live in decent circumstances.¹⁷ As a result, the poor-quality existing housing in the city could be removed, resulting in the ‘dissolution of the cities’ and a situation where people and industry could be more evenly distributed over the country.¹⁸ Gutkind was aware that his vision of a decentralised Germany (a vision that was in fact more generally shared in Germany at the time) would require fundamental changes in the procurement of land, investment, resources and materials; as well as, particularly, in people’s mentality.¹⁹ But, he noted, if the will is there, a way can be found.²⁰

In the subsequent decade, Gutkind established himself in private architectural practice. Designing various new housing estates (*Siedlungen*) in the suburbs of Berlin, he became an eminent member of the modernist avant-garde, whose work was regularly mentioned and published together with that of the likes of Erich Mendelsohn, Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut (Figure 2). Although he mainly concentrated on his practice work, he nonetheless continued to develop his ideas about the need for decentralisation and dispersal. In 1932, on the eve of his departure from Germany, he once again put forward his thoughts on the matter in an article in *Die Baugilde*.²¹ Taking stock of the state of affairs in the German construction industry in the polemic and outspoken style that was to become one of his trademarks, he briefly touched on some of the issues that he would analyse in more detail in his subsequent writings. Interestingly, he criticised the modern movement and the new housing estates it had produced so far (including, assumedly, his own) for not having been able to make a real change. More in particular, he lamented the fact that the much-needed migration from city to countryside had not taken place, resulting in the development of ‘misdirected’ and ‘dangerously romantic’ suburban settlements, as well as in food shortages

¹⁷ Gutkind, *Neues Bauen*, 9.

¹⁸ Gutkind, *Neues Bauen*, 10.

¹⁹ Ward, *Planning the Twentieth-Century City*.

²⁰ Gutkind, *Neues Bauen*, 12.

²¹ Gutkind, “Bilanz.”

in the cities.²² All this was the result of the wrong intellectual, human and financial choices that had been made by ‘realist’ politicians who put the needs of capital before those of people. What was needed to break the deadlock and enter a new era, he noted, was a ‘loosening up’ (*Auflockerung*) of the cities and a ‘pouring in’ (*Hineinpumpen*) of urban people into the countryside.²³ This process would potentially be brutal (‘cities and regions may die’), but it was necessary for ‘the development of the people’.²⁴ What was needed to facilitate those fundamental and radical changes, Gutkind stated, was a National Plan.

As it turned out, the article was the last one Gutkind published while living in Germany. The next year he moved abroad, spending some time in France before finally settling in the UK in 1935. This move, though no doubt difficult and disruptive, did not stop him from developing his ideas. Although little is known about the early period of his life in London, Gutkind appears to have spent the first few years learning English and researching problems of urban and rural settlement.²⁵ At the start of World War II, possibly with the help of Sir George Pepler and Ewart G. Culpin, he managed to find work for the Demographic Survey of the 1940 Council, which provided him with an opportunity to develop his ideas in more detail. The 1940 Council was one of a number of non-governmental organisations set up at the time to investigate and plan the reconstruction of the country after the war.²⁶ Chaired by the 7th Lord Balfour of Burleigh, George John Gordon Bruce, and bringing together ‘planners, architects, sociologists, economists and technical and research workers of all kinds’, it aimed to promote research into ‘the environmental needs of the community’ and to educate the general public about the importance of planning.²⁷ One of the main research programmes it supported was the Demographic Survey, which was charged with the

²² Gutkind, “Bilanz.” 62.

²³ Gutkind, “Bilanz.” 62.

²⁴ Gutkind, “Bilanz.” 62.

²⁵ Grabow, “The Outsider.” 201.

²⁶ Anonymous, “Research and Planning for Reconstruction”; Anonymous, “Research Activities.”

²⁷ Anonymous, “Research and Planning for Reconstruction”, 5.

preparation of a shadow National Plan to determine the post-war environmental organisation of the UK. Gutkind was the ‘organiser’ of the Survey, working closely with experts like the geographers C.B. Fawcett and A.E. Smailes and the agricultural economist A.W. Ashby.²⁸ The survey ran under the auspices of the 1940 Council for one year, after which time it carried on independently.²⁹

His work for the Demographic Survey provided Gutkind with a platform to develop and disseminate his ideas about both the importance of national planning and a radically different way of relating communities to one another and their environment by means of a fundamental redistribution of both industry and population. In a number of publications, including journal articles, the official report of the Demographic Survey and, perhaps most notably, his book *Creative Demobilisation*, Gutkind put forward the argument that the imminent rebuilding of the UK after the war provided an opportunity to ‘creatively’ re-imagine the way in which human settlement, industry, agriculture and the natural environment were organised.³⁰ Echoing his earlier writings on the situation in Weimar Germany, he called for the need of a National Plan that should ‘provide the basis for the immediate post-war reconstruction, which will be simply the first instalment of the long-distance development of the redistribution of population and settlement’.³¹ The key thing that should happen, he noted, was the decentralisation of the big urban conglomerations, coupled with a more even distribution of the population over the whole country by means of a process of dispersal. This would require radical measures, including the dissolution of existing cities, the displacement of industries, agriculture, transportation networks and entire communities, and the establishment of new settlements in hitherto unsettled parts of the country; but it

²⁸ Gutkind, “The National Plan for Great Britain.”

²⁹ Gutkind, “Demographic Survey and Plan.”

³⁰ Gutkind, “The National Plan for Great Britain”; 1940 Council, *Demographic Survey and Plan*; Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*.

³¹ Gutkind, “The National Plan for Great Britain.” 76.

would also result in a more inspiring and diversified environment in which the functions of housing, work, distribution and recreation, which he identified as fundamental to human well-being, could all be performed in harmony and where individual human beings could live freely as members of small neighbourhood communities. Rather than post-war reconstruction, which implied an attitude of ‘hoping to start again where we left off in 1939’, this would be a ‘creative demobilisation’; ‘a turning point similar – probably even more decisive – to that of the industrial revolution’ that would introduce a new post-urban era in human history.³²

Gutkind did not work alone and the ideas he put forward at this time were shared by the other contributors to the Demographic Survey. The proposed plans were comprehensive and detailed (although the survey members acknowledged a lot more work would still have to be done to make them practicable), taking in aspects of human geography, agriculture, industry and architecture. They were based on data compiled through various research projects carried out in collaboration with a number of universities, trusts and government bodies.³³ Nonetheless, it would seem the proposals did not have much of an impact and the work of the Demographic Survey has remained relatively unknown since it appeared, much like the 1940 Council that supported it. This obscurity seems to a large extent related to the impractical nature of the proposals. As contemporary reviewers of Gutkind’s *Creative Demobilisation* were quick to point out, the proposals lacked ‘the basic prerequisite of a study on planning, namely, realism’ and did not relate to ‘the social, economic and psychological conditions prevailing in Great Britain’.³⁴ Despite the ‘admirable aspirations’, this was ‘not scheming but dreaming’.³⁵ ‘There will, of course, be no moving of industries

³² Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, x; Gutkind, “The National Plan for Great Britain.” 79.

³³ 1940 Council, *Demographic Survey and Plan*.

³⁴ Weintraub, “Book Review: Creative Demobilisation.” 103.

³⁵ MacFie, “Book Review: Creative Demobilisation.” 47; Weintraub, “Book Review: Creative Demobilisation.” 103.

about the country like pawns on a chess-board'.³⁶ 'We certainly should dream some dreams', but 'however willing the spirit, we are all flesh'.³⁷ The proposal to decentralise and disperse not only industries, but actual cities and communities, was deemed too unrealistic and utopian and not in tune with the realities of life: 'A national plan which should follow would, to appeal to the English, be considerably different and much more fitted to the realities of those people who love their Merry England so much'.³⁸

Just as in interbellum Germany, Gutkind found himself confronted with a political and professional reluctance to implement the kind of decentralisation and dispersal he envisioned. Although decentralisation was in fact high on the planning agenda in post-war Britain, the practical obstacles to moving industries, communities and transportation systems around the country 'like pawns on a chess-board' seemed too enormous; similarly, the social, cultural and psychological barriers appeared insurmountable.³⁹ Although Gutkind acknowledged that 'the human factor' should not be neglected, he believed that the attachments people have to their places were 'dictated by sentimentalism, not by insight' and that one therefore 'need not be too timid' in moving individuals or entire communities from one place to another.⁴⁰ It was not impossible 'to wash out the present map of Great Britain', provided one was willing to go beyond 'petty' or 'easy little reforms'.⁴¹ 'We must look forward, for the future is more important than the past and the present' he boldly stated.⁴² Many of his contemporaries, however, seemed to disagree. Even if decentralisation and dispersal were regularly envisioned and discussed, the mentality needed to implement societal changes on the radical scale that he already called for back in Berlin in 1919 seemed absent. Gutkind experienced

³⁶ Cairncross, "Book Review: Diagnosis of Our Time and Creative Demobilisation". 224.

³⁷ MacFie, "Book Review: Creative Demobilisation." 47.

³⁸ Zimmerman, "Book Review: Creative Demobilisation." 169.

³⁹ Hall, "The Centenary of Modern Planning"; Ward, *Planning the Twentieth-Century City*.

⁴⁰ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 107; 92; 106.

⁴¹ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 92-93.

⁴² Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 89.

this most directly when, in 1946, he joined the British Control Commission in Germany as an ‘advisor’ on the physical reconstruction of the war-torn country.⁴³ Not surprisingly, decentralisation and dispersal constituted the keywords of his advice.⁴⁴ The British Control Commission, however, instead opted for a reconstruction process that fundamentally maintained the town and country divide.⁴⁵ Frustrated by the lack of ‘vision or courage to act except on the most conventional lines’ on the part of the Commission officials, Gutkind resigned his advisory position and subsequently focused his attention on theory.

The theory of decentralisation and dispersal

Gutkind’s advocacy of decentralisation and dispersal was remarkably consistent, despite the rapidly changing times in which he lived and the consequently very different circumstances he faced. Whether he was confronting the problems of reconstruction faced by Germany directly after World War I; the state of urban planning and architecture in the last years of an instable Weimar Republic; the opportunities for redevelopment in the direct aftermath of World War II in a victorious UK; the simultaneous need for reconstruction in a defeated and crushed Germany; or the problems of urban sprawl and urban renewal in an economically booming USA during the 1950s and 1960s, Gutkind’s response was always the same: the existing cities (be they Berlin in 1918, London in 1946 or New York in 1964) should be ‘loosened up’, their inhabitants, industries and commercial activities dispersed, and the regions that form their hinterlands revived. Economies may have been destroyed or booming; population numbers may have been shrinking or growing; cities may have been thriving or struggling; countries may have been at war or at peace; but the need for decentralisation and dispersal remained omnipresent. Despite the fact that his ideas were never taken up and were

⁴³ Vonderach, *Von Ellwürden nach Hampstead*, 153.

⁴⁴ Gutkind, “Report on a Void.”

⁴⁵ Gutkind, “Reconstruction in Germany.” 4; Diefendorf, *In the Wake of War*.

instead frequently criticised, Gutkind never wavered in his conviction that radical changes were needed to enable the emergence of a more healthy and sustainable relationship between people and their environment, and that decentralisation and dispersal were the key to achieve them; not only in Germany, the UK and the USA, but all around the world. Consequently, after his failure to convince the British Control Commission, he dedicated the latter stages of his career to the research needed to support this conviction.

Although he was fundamentally dealing with a reconfiguration of the general relationship between people and their environment, Gutkind's starting-point was always the city. Like so many other architects and planners of his time, Gutkind saw the modern city of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a problem.⁴⁶ In *The Twilight of Cities*, a book that summarised his main arguments and was written to reach out to a more general audience, he made his verdict on it very clear:

‘Never before have men’s living and working places been more unsystematically lumped together; never before have houses and streets so completely lost their functional significance. Never before has an uncultured atmosphere of such brute intensity dominated the layout and architectural appearance of our cities. The fact that we have got so used to the monstrosities and discrepancies of our physical environment that we hardly recognise them is no excuse, nor does it make a radical break with these conditions less urgent’.⁴⁷

The modern city, to Gutkind, was a place of chaos and inefficiency; it was uncivilised, and it was ugly. The fault lay clearly with the ‘mismanagement and muddle’ created by the architects and planners. ‘(...) to all who are not biased it is evident beyond a doubt that city

⁴⁶ Hall, *Cities or Tomorrow*.

⁴⁷ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 41.

planning reached its lowest level during the last hundred years. The greatest compliment that could be paid to it would be silence'.⁴⁸

Interestingly, Gutkind rarely elaborated on what was wrong with the modern city, focusing most of his attention on how to remedy its shortcomings and, later on in particular, on the historical developments that led to them. A few aspects nonetheless stand out with regard to his assessment of the modern city. In terms of urban and architectural design, he consistently identified the relationship between streets and houses as a major problem. In the modern city, the street had become a 'canyon lined on both sides by uninterrupted rows of houses'.⁴⁹ A nineteenth century 'cult of the street' that had taken the street as the starting-point of urban development had resulted in a situation where neither streets nor houses fulfilled their functions efficiently.⁵⁰ The former, 'conceived and effected on a pedestrian's scale and in the spirit of the palaeotechnic age', had resulted in traffic congestion, noise, pollution, accidents and 'dull uniformity'; the latter formed 'long and sterile rows of buildings', monotonous, repetitive and dull, that lacked 'life, change and vigor', as well as the much-needed light, air and sun.⁵¹ The root cause for the resulting urban chaos and inefficiency was an imbalance between what he, like many of his contemporaries, referred to as 'the four functions' of human life: housing, work, distribution and recreation.⁵² Work, he noted, had become more important than the others. Industry and commerce had been concentrated in the cities, leading to a dominance of the latter over their rural hinterlands. Within the cities, the functions of home and work had been separated. The long distances that people had to travel to commute from home to work had resulted in ribbon development, urban sprawl, traffic congestion and 'suburban dullness'.⁵³ Those, in turn, had created 'the

⁴⁸ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 41.

⁴⁹ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 8.

⁵⁰ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 8.

⁵¹ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 8; Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 52.

⁵² Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*.

⁵³ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 2.

horrible higgledy-piggledy in which we live'; 'a confused mass of unrelated details, sprawling over at the periphery into subtopias and beyond into vast conurbations'.⁵⁴

More important than those functional and aesthetic design matters, to Gutkind, were the social and environmental problems that he observed in the city. 'The modern city', he noted, 'is not a social community'.⁵⁵ Human relationships in cities had become impersonal, individualistic, hectic and completely subservient to economic interests. Drawing on Tönnies' well-known dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (association), he noted how, 'at best', the city 'is an association of different classes of society on an economic basis, at worst an agglomeration of human atoms'.⁵⁶ In either case, without people realising, the freedom of the individual had been sacrificed to the needs of an impersonal collective whose only concern was economic in nature and whose actions were singularly driven by a *laissez-faire* attitude. Displaying 'a herd-consciousness on a scale never before known', people in cities 'do not even realise that [they] are fractional men and that [they] do not live a personal life at all'.⁵⁷ 'What [they] expect of life is in essence that it should resemble a smoothly running train stopping at the familiar stations where [they] can get out for work'.⁵⁸ This dominance of 'Economic Man' over 'Social Man' went hand in hand with an unbalanced relationship between modern cities and their natural environments. Drawing on Martin Buber and foreshadowing the late twentieth century sustainability debates, he noted how this relationship was one of dominance and aggression (what he called an 'I-It' relationship), rather than of fear and respect (an 'I-Thou' relationship) as it had been in the rural past (and still was in his view in the traditional societies of the developing world).

⁵⁴ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 45.

⁵⁵ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 43.

⁵⁶ Tönnies, *Community and Association*; Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 43.

⁵⁷ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 79-80; Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 79.

⁵⁸ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 79.

Urban man was ruthless and deluded, and had caused environmental exploitation, degradation and decline.⁵⁹

In Gutkind's opinion, the architectural, social and environmental problems of the modern city were the result of an uncontrolled urban growth that had taken place during the modern era, especially since the Industrial Revolution. In all his writings, Gutkind took pains to show how the modern city was the result of a process of urban development and expansion that he believed started some 5,000 years ago in the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia and that had reached its climax in Europe and North America in the twentieth century. All his major publications, including *Revolution of Environment*, *The Expanding Environment*, *The Twilight of Cities* and, of course, most significantly, *International History of City Development*, contained extensive analyses of the historical development of cities during the 180 generations that, by his calculation, separated the first cities from their modern counterparts. During this period, Gutkind argued in classic evolutionist fashion, cities all around the world had developed in purpose, size and structure along the same universal lines. Early cities were relatively small, densely built-up and walled centres of commerce and political power. During the renaissance, influenced by the rising power of the nation-state, urban hierarchies emerged as small groups of cities began to dominate the many others, growing faster in size, economic influence and power. In the modern era, this development had resulted in a process of uncontrolled growth and expansion that, fuelled by capitalism, had created the urban chaos, inefficiency and sprawl of the current era. This development, which was most advanced in Europe and North America but would inevitably also take place in other parts of the world, had also created the vast distance between humans and their natural environment that characterised the modern city.

⁵⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*; Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 72.

To Gutkind, the modern social and environmental problems were an indication that the concept of a city, as a complex human settlement that contains large numbers of people and assumes a dominant economic, social, political and geographical position in a given locality, had outgrown its original function and had reached the end of its usefulness. In the early stages of his career, when he was designing new housing estates in interbellum Berlin, he appeared to still see value in attempting to improve the conditions of urban life. While working for the Demographic Survey in London, he similarly still argued for the introduction of zoning, green belts and parks to alleviate the problem of urban sprawl. By then, however, as noted above, he was already convinced that decentralisation and dispersal were the better and in his eyes only ways forward. By the 1950s, having turned away from practice, Gutkind's verdict had become final: the city, he stated, was dead and any attempt (like Le Corbusier's *La Ville Radieuse*) to revive or renew it was useless and perverse.⁶⁰ Rather than lamenting its death, he saw 'a great opportunity'. 'We must begin anew just as the first city builders opened a new chapter in the history of mankind'.⁶¹ What was needed, he noted, was a 'revolution of environment'. The end of the city had 'opened the way to the creation of a new environment, neither city nor country, an environment for which we have not yet found a name but which is more than either city or country as we have known them in the past in their sterile antagonism and life destroying degeneration'.⁶² For the time being, he called it 'the expanding environment'.

The inevitability of decentralisation and dispersal

The new 'expanding environment' that Gutkind had in mind was essentially one that transcended the modern urban-rural dichotomy by consisting of numerous interspersed

⁶⁰ Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 14; Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 151

⁶¹ Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 14.

⁶² Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 14.

settlements that related to one another in a non-hierarchical manner. Rather than the conventional situation where a few cities are larger and more dominant than all other towns, villages and hamlets in a region, Gutkind's expanding environment would be one where the stratification of settlements ceased to exist. The economic, political and cultural functions of the city, the village and the countryside would be dispersed among all settlements, resulting in an environment where there would no longer be a place for dominating urban centres. The expanding environment would not only be without centres, however; it would consequently also no longer require regions or boundaries of any kind. 'The new regionalism', Gutkind noted in *The Expanding Environment*, 'is free from all limitations. It is a centre-less and time-less conception. It is more than a mere decentralization which proceeds always in relation to a centre. (...) It is a dispersal, a scattering apart'.⁶³ Such an expanding environment, he argued (preluding subsequent debates about globalisation), was needed in a 'shrinking world' that was rapidly becoming global and where boundaries of any kind (national, cultural, economic) would soon become obsolete.⁶⁴ It would give rise to small communities that focused on human rather than economic values and that would allow each individual to regain their freedom and be their own centre. Not only would such a radically different environmental configuration restore human communities; it would also rehabilitate the disrupted balance between humans and their natural environments, allowing responsibility and unification to take the place of ruthlessness and exploitation.

'A new landscape will emerge, a continuous green carpet interrupted by the small community units'.⁶⁵ Gutkind discussed the qualities of this new landscape in all his major publications. In *Revolution of Environment* he painted a detailed and idyllic picture of what the world would look like after it had gone through the revolution he envisioned:

⁶³ Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 61.

⁶⁴ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 2.

⁶⁵ Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 58.

‘We look down at a green surface dotted with buildings and larger groups of houses, between which the green of the vegetation resembles the fine ramifications of a delta (...). Nature is everywhere dominant (...). No pall of smoke overhangs the towns. The air is clear, so that the bright colours of the buildings can be easily distinguished (...). The railways, now completely electrified and running on a sound-absorbing sub-structure, speed along their silvery parallels. Motor cars provide local transport (...). The densely built-up urban areas have disappeared, giving way to a loose grouping embedded in the green of the parks, parkways, gardens and allotments. There are no factory chimneys, for the electrification of industry has been made compulsory (...). But what impresses us most is the omnipresence of Nature and the great diversity in the arrangement of the buildings (...). We are taken by a guide to a memorial which has been preserved in its original state as an open-air museum. It is the last Garden City. Instead of these isolated attempts the whole country has been made one good dwelling and every community in it a Park City’.⁶⁶

In later publications he tried to capture this utopian image in a series of drawings that juxtaposed his expanding environment with the existing one, both visually and through the addition of keywords that expressed the dichotomous relationship of the two environments (Figures 3 and 4).⁶⁷

In arguing for a complete dissolution of cities and any kind of hierarchical relationship between settlements, Gutkind’s proposal was very radical in nature and at odds with much of contemporary planning theory and practice.⁶⁸ Gutkind himself was very aware of this, but it did not stop him from continuing to argue his case and to work out practical ways in which it could be realised. Convinced as he was that ‘we need not fear far-reaching changes, and that their pace should be deliberately and systematically quickened’, over the

⁶⁶ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 94-95.

⁶⁷ Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 62-65; Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 202-208.

⁶⁸ Hall and Tewdwr-Jones, *Urban and Regional Planning*.

years he developed various proposals and ‘programs of action’ that he believed would enable the emergence of his decentralised and dispersed expanding environment.⁶⁹ Those proposals were varied and broad in scope. On the one hand, at a local level, he argued for changes in the design of houses and their relationship to streets, calling for more diversity and for the use of modern materials and conveniences. True to his architectural background, he noted how ‘modern architecture has already shown the way’ on this front.⁷⁰ On the other hand, at a national level (in addition to the compulsory displacement of housing, industry and communities), he proposed programmes of research into natural resources (to aid finding the proper locations for industries); argued in some depth for the modernisation (through mechanisation and intensification) of agriculture; and drew up detailed proposals to further the education of planners (including the establishment of a model town where the principles could be tested). Finally, at an international level, he argued for the establishment of an ‘International Society’ that would promote ‘those tendencies which will advance the world’s present trend towards unification’ (i.e. globalisation); as well as for the establishment of ‘social ecology’ as a new field of study.⁷¹ All this, he noted in the conclusion to *The Twilight of Cities*, ‘can become a reality, if we will it (...)’.⁷²

Throughout his career, Gutkind was keen to show how his proposals moved beyond the concept of decentralisation as it was commonly interpreted during the early and mid-twentieth century.⁷³ Decentralisation, exemplified by the Garden City and New Town movements, was nothing more than ‘the development of suburbs on the fringes of the central city, which is preserved as substantially the same compact entity that it has been before’.⁷⁴ It was ‘sheer window-dressing even though a few pleasant and isolated solutions may be the

⁶⁹ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 3.

⁷⁰ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 75.

⁷¹ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 159.

⁷² Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 200.

⁷³ Hall, *Cities or Tomorrow*; Lefaivre and Tzonis, *Architecture of Regionalism*.

⁷⁴ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 149.

result'.⁷⁵ For Gutkind (who in his early days in Berlin in fact had argued for the introduction of 'garden city-like' settlements), the problem with Garden Cities and New Towns was that they did not fundamentally alter the relationship between town and country, as the former ultimately maintained its central position in a region and the latter remained subordinate and neglected. They were 'frustrated hybrids with the disadvantage of city and country but without the positive attractions of either'.⁷⁶ For similar reasons, as noted before, Gutkind was also sceptical of proposals such as Le Corbusier's *La Ville Radieuse*, which saw the solution to the city's problems in 'the discovery of the third dimension', height'.⁷⁷ An ever greater concentration of people within the ever narrower space of a skyscraper did not make sense. 'Let us build by all means as high as we can but let us not pretend that this is a solution (...)'.⁷⁸ 'They [skyscrapers] are an end [to the urban era], not the prelude to a new era'.⁷⁹ For Gutkind, only the fundamental abolition of the traditional role of a city as an all-absorbing centre, resulting in an environment where populations were dispersed across a region and a hierarchy of settlements no longer existed, could resolve the disturbed balance between town and country.

At the same time, Gutkind was equally anxious to make sure that his proposals were not seen as an example of a 'back to the land' attitude.⁸⁰ 'This movement', he noted in *Creative Demobilisation*, 'need not be mentioned at all if it would not be a hindrance (...)'; which, as a confirmed modernist, he clearly thought it was.⁸¹ Rather than returning to a simpler, rural way of life based on craft and subsistence farming, Gutkind envisioned communities that were neither urban nor rural, but that combined aspects of both and that

⁷⁵ Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 35.

⁷⁶ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 126.

⁷⁷ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 127.

⁷⁸ Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 34.

⁷⁹ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 128.

⁸⁰ Marsh, *Back to the Land*; Lefaivre and Tzonis, *Architecture of Regionalism*.

⁸¹ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 69.

looked forward to the future, rather than backward to some imagined and idealised past. Rather than small-holdings, what were needed, he argued, were larger and mechanised farm units: ‘tractor sized farms’ instead of ‘man sized farms’. Agriculture had to intensify and be industrialised, using the new technologies that were available. Similarly, ‘the great achievement of modern architecture’ should be introduced outside of the cities. A ‘rationalised building process’ based on prefabrication, standardisation and mass production should replace traditional handicraft and produce housing of appropriate quality. Modern technologies (‘the motor-car, the wireless, the telephone, the newspaper, the cinema’) should be embraced rather than shunned.⁸² Even the television, he noted, ‘may work in creating new family and social bonds’.⁸³ Sentimentalism and romanticism about the past should be shunned; ‘that past is, after all, something which must give way to the present and the future’.⁸⁴ ‘We cannot go back’, he concluded, ‘we must, on the contrary, make full and systematic uses of these forces [inherent in technological innovations]’ if the creation of a more balanced relationship between communities and their environment was the goal.⁸⁵

Ultimately, Gutkind’s commitment to the need to move forward, to embrace change and modern technology and to not shy away from ‘washing out the map’ by dissolving cities, moving industries and displacing entire populations was based on his conviction that a decentralised and dispersed environment was not just desirable or necessary, but inevitable. To Gutkind, the expanding environment that he envisioned was not simply another utopian vision. It was the logical next step in the relationship between humans, their environment and, ultimately, the universe; a relationship that had evolved, in a relatively brief space of time, from one where the world was seen to be at the centre of a bounded universe to one

⁸² Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 83.

⁸³ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 80.

⁸⁴ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 235.

⁸⁵ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 89.

where the universe was regarded as infinite and expanding. Noting how, in general, ‘the changing view of space in architecture is a reflection of the changing conception of the universe’, Gutkind saw the evolution of humanity’s understanding of the universe and its place in it reflected in the development of the concept of the city.⁸⁶ Early cities like those of the Romans, the Chinese, the Arabs or the Incas were walled and restricted in growth, reflecting a world view in which the earth was seen to be the centre of a fixed and limited universe and man was the centre of life on earth. After Copernicus and Galilei, the earth lost its central position in the universe and was forced to assume a secondary role after the sun; humanity, Gutkind argued, likewise felt itself relegated to the periphery. As a result, from the Renaissance onwards cities (in Europe, initially, but later on elsewhere too) lost their central position: the state became more important than the city, while city walls lost their function and cities began to expand and sprawl in an unorganised and confused manner, reflecting humanity’s confusion about its new position on the periphery. The chaotic, dysfunctional and ugly modern city (and its neglected and exploited counterpart, the countryside) was the outcome of this process.

The early twentieth century, however, had seen the development of a new concept of the universe; one where the heliocentric model had given way to the infinite and expanding universe of Lemaître, Einstein and Hubble, in which there no longer was a place for centres. This expanding universe, Gutkind noted, quoting the astronomer Arthur Eddington, was ‘a general scattering apart, having no particular centre of dispersal’.⁸⁷ To Gutkind, the implications of this new concept were obvious. ‘We are living in a centreless time’, he observed, and consequently all humanity’s activities, including the design and distribution of settlements, should reflect this.⁸⁸ Inevitably, cities, ‘as the exclusive centres on which

⁸⁶ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 70.

⁸⁷ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 224.

⁸⁸ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 224.

practically all functions are focused’, would have to lose their importance to reflect the new notion of a centreless expanding environment and be replaced by a new form of environmental organisation, where communities lived in regions that had no centres and that did not stand in a hierarchical relationship to one another.⁸⁹ Only such a settlement structure could genuinely and meaningfully reflect the new understanding of a centreless expanding universe and humanity’s position in it. Importantly, Gutkind noted, in view of the fact that the world was ‘shrinking’ (i.e. globalising), it would result in a new world in which there would not only be no more dominating centres, but also no more place for boundaries; tribal, national, religious or otherwise.⁹⁰

Although Gutkind was convinced that the decentralisation and dispersal that would lead to an expanding environment would thus eventually have to take place, he was acutely aware that it would be a challenge and take some time to become a reality. Just as it took time for the cities of the world to respond to the heliocentric model, so, ‘of course’, would the adaptation to the new expanding environment be ‘a long-term process’.⁹¹ In fact, seeing that it had only been ten generations since humanity had begun to see the universe as a heliocentric rather than geocentric phenomenon, it was ‘only natural that mankind has not yet adapted itself to this radical revolution in thinking and acting’.⁹² Humankind, he noted, paraphrasing the physicist James Jeans, looked at on an astronomical time-scale, was like a three-days-old baby who had only just become aware that the world does not centre on its cradle. ‘We are accepting only reluctantly new truths, new perspectives, and new surroundings, in short everything that has not been instilled in us since our earliest days. We are fighting for obsolete institutions [in particular, he noted, the church, the state and

⁸⁹ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 224.

⁹⁰ Gutkind, *Creative Demobilisation*, 2; Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 225.

⁹¹ Gutkind, *Revolution of Environment*, 225.

⁹² Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 5.

tradition] which in the past played the role of parental guides'.⁹³ Those institutions, however, could no longer help humanity in the twentieth century and, like cities, bore the mark of obsolescence. 'We are alone in this world', Gutkind stated in *Community and Environment*, 'and nobody can help us to rebuild it. We must do it ourselves'.⁹⁴ Once humanity realised this, overcame its fear of the world outside its cradle and no longer felt helpless in the face of the new possibilities offered by the new scale of time and space, the 'revolution of environment' that would rejuvenate the relationship between individuals, communities and their environment would surely take place (Figure 5). 'There can be no doubt', he confidently concluded in the *Twilight of Cities*.⁹⁵

The currency of decentralisation and dispersal

After his decision in the late 1940s to mainly concentrate on theory, Gutkind disseminated his ideas in a range of publications, including the books *Revolution of Environment*, *Our World from the Air*, *Community and Environment* and *The Expanding Environment*. Each of those looked at different aspects of the central issue (the need for a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between people and their environment) from different, but closely related perspectives. During the 1960s, Gutkind summarised his key argument in *The Twilight of Cities*, a book specifically written to reach out to a more popular audience; as well as, briefly, in the introduction to his latest work, the *International History of City Development*, which effectively aimed to provide detailed historical support for his argument. Perhaps not surprisingly, the responses to his argument were mixed, ranging from downright negative assessments to qualified appreciative ones. In effect, the reviews echoed those to his earlier work for the Demographic Survey: the central argument about decentralisation and dispersal

⁹³ Gutkind, *The Expanding Environment*, 5.

⁹⁴ Gutkind, *Community and Environment*, 33.

⁹⁵ Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 73.

was too impractical, radical and, to some, dogmatic, pretentious, irrational and revolutionary.⁹⁶ Although generally appreciative of the scope of scholarship (especially in the case of the *International History of City Development*) and the relevance of the theme, most reviewers agreed that the argument was too ‘abstract, idealistic and vague’ and ‘hopelessly utopian’.⁹⁷ Gutkind’s polemic and outspoken style, ‘marred by hyperbole, but seldom by equivocation’ was not always appreciated either; containing too many ‘sweeping historical generalisations’ and ‘ramblings in historical and philosophical byways’ and not enough of what Gutkind ‘appears to regard with some contempt: facts’.⁹⁸ At best, Gutkind’s writings provided useful data and food for thought; at worst (in reference to *Community and Environment*), it seemed ‘hard to justify the consumption of 80 pages and the expense of an elaborate format to say them’.⁹⁹

In *The Twilight of Cities*, Gutkind had himself also reflected on the value of his work. Perhaps in response to T.H.M.’s comment that ‘the theory [put forward in *Revolution of Environment*] contains little that has not already been very much better said by Lewis Mumford’, he wanted to ‘confute one argument that is, as I know from experience, most likely to be put forward, namely, that the following suggestions are basically not different from the usual plans for the decentralisation of urban areas’.¹⁰⁰ Apart from, possibly, Frank Lloyd Wright’s *The Disappearing City*, he noted that, ‘to the best of my knowledge’, there was no other author who proposed the elimination of ‘the traditional role of the city as an all-absorbing centre’ as he did.¹⁰¹ His work, he maintained, was unique and although ‘I do not

⁹⁶ For example, W.A.E., “Book Review: Revolution of Environment”; Ascher, “Book Review: Our World from the Air”; Wise, “Book Review: Our World from the Air.”

⁹⁷ Kirk, “Book Review: The Twilight of Cities.” 201; Gutman, “Book Review: The Twilight of Cities.” 304.

⁹⁸ Pfretzschner, “Book Review: Community and Environment.” 140; Kirk, “Book Review: The Twilight of Cities.” 201; Lang, “Book Review: International History of City Development.” 150.

⁹⁹ Greer, “Book Review: The Twilight of Cities”; Pragma, “Comment”; Glass, “Book Review: Community and Environment.” 345.

¹⁰⁰ T.H.M., “Book Review: Revolution of Environment.” 97; Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 150.

¹⁰¹ Wright, *The Disappearing City*; Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 150.

pretend for a moment that my own ideas offer a final solution or that they cannot be criticised on any reasonable ground', he hoped, 'on the contrary (...) that they will stimulate discussion and reassessment'.¹⁰² In fact, he fully expected criticisms to be expressed, aware as he was of how different his radical utopian ideas were from those of 'the *laissez-faire* realists' whose historical dominance had, in his eyes, led to the problems of the modern city.

Conclusion

Looking back at Gutkind's impressive oeuvre that spans six decades, it is indeed possible to argue that his work was unique, even though it engaged with issues that were generally much discussed at the time. Although many of Gutkind's ideas about decentralisation and dispersal reflected those of the times and concurred with those of his contemporaries, the way in which he combined them into a complex argument, drawing on his practical experiences and a range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, was truly his own. The practical application of his ideas proved difficult, both in his native Germany and the UK, no doubt because his proposals were too radical and too much at odds with contemporary planning practice in calling for the complete dissolution of the city. Nonetheless, the theoretical aspects of the proposals remain of interest. The notion that decentralisation is in fact an inevitability because it constitutes the only genuine and meaningful means to reflect humanity's new understanding of the universe as being centreless and expanding would appear particularly noteworthy. It demonstrates that Gutkind's perspective on the end of cities was ultimately unique, even though it combined a range of ideas that were more commonplace, and that his writings on the subject of decentralisation and dispersal are not simply another exponent of

¹⁰² Gutkind, *The Twilight of Cities*, 151.

anti-urbanist writings. At a time when the growth, 'liveability' and sustainability of cities remains high on the agenda in all countries of the world, Gutkind's curiously overlooked oeuvre, as utopian, radical and polemic as it may be, remains worthy of further consideration.

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