



MARKETPLACE: Shlomo Maital

Imagine!

“IMAGINE,” FORMER BEATLE JOHN LENNON SANG in his 1971 hit, “imagine all the people... sharing all the world... You may say that I’m a dreamer... but I’m not the only one.” You’re not alone, John. Let us all imagine!

Imagine, if you will, getting up in the morning, scrambling bleary-eyed into your car, and spending a frazzling hour or two in a traffic jam, arriving at work irritable and crabby, only to reverse the process at day’s end, arriving home exhausted after battling aggressive motorists for another hour or more. And then – repeat the torture again, the next day, and every weekday.

There is no need to imagine. This is the reality many face, in Israel and abroad. According to the United Nations Population Fund, since 2008 a majority of the world’s population, some 3.3 billion people, live in cities. Far more people work in cities. And cities everywhere are increasingly choked by private cars. Gush Dan, the greater Tel Aviv metropolis, has a population of 3.2 million. Four Israelis in every 10 live there. If greater Tel Aviv road arteries were human arteries, they would cause constant heart attacks. Perhaps they do.

So, let’s listen to Lennon’s words again. This time, imagine getting up in the morning, walking to work down tree-lined boulevards, stopping for coffee at an outdoor café; or walking to a railroad station and zipping by train to work, to shop, to classes or to do errands or meet friends, a half-hour away.

This is the neighborhood-sharing vision of a group of revolutionary city planners, known as the New Urbanists. They propose a new approach to urban development built around public transportation, known as transit-oriented development, or TOD. Together with two colleagues, Technion Professor Daniel Gat and Ben-Gurion University senior lecturer Yodan Rofè, I helped convene Israel’s first conference on TOD at the Haifa Technion’s Neaman Institute, on March 9. Our keynote speaker was Peter Katz, a leader and founder of New Urbanism in America, now a Sarasota, Florida, County urban planner.

TOD is defined as moderate-to-high density development, featuring a mix of residential, employment and retail uses, all in short walking distance from adjacent public transportation. The essence of TOD is making transportation (access) a vital part of every master plan. Indeed, easy access is the starting point of urban development. This is not the case today in Israel.

In his wonderful book “The Botany of Desire,” science writer Michael Pollan refutes our anthropocentric view of the world, where people dominate trees and flowers. Instead, Pollan suggests, perhaps flowers and trees control us, by creating qualities that humans like

(scent, color, fruit), and hence lead to their widespread propagation by humans.

By the same token, the world can be seen as car-centric. If they could vote, Israel’s 2.4 million vehicles would form a majority. And indeed, they do “vote,” controlling the people who drive them. With our limited imagination, we cannot seem to imagine a world other than one where rubber, gasoline, asphalt and concrete dominate our traffic-jammed lives.

‘Can we enlist John Lennon, Peter Katz, the New Urbanism and TOD to unchain our lives from the tyranny of cars?’

SOME 500 YEARS AGO, NICOLA Machiavelli asked the question, why it is so tough to implement any change in accepted ways of doing things? His answer, in his landmark book “The Prince”: “Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.”

This applies to TOD. Even though his ministry guides and controls Israel Railways, Transportation Minister Israel Katz is not a friend of rail transport. The reason? Politics. Truckers, oil companies, car importers, and

garages are numerous and powerful and have vested interests (protected by lobbyists) in seeing more and more roads, cars and trucks. The trains’ constituency is diffuse and weak. To paraphrase Stalin: How many “tanks” does Israel Railways have?

At the conference, I urged Israeli urban planners to “open the windows” and see how other nations plan their cities. Interviewed by Israel Radio’s Mickey Miro, Rofè noted that Stockholm is built around train stations. Other cities are following suit. In the U.S. alone there are over 100 TOD-based developments, with another 100 in planning stages.

In Israel, Rofè says, people often have to get into their cars just to get to the train station, located outside population centers. Once you’re in your car, people think, why not just drive to where you want to go? Rofè explains that Israel’s rail lines were originally built by the Turks and the British. The British determined the locations of the train stations mainly to serve their bases, not population centers. And that historical error is perpetuated in modern-day Israel. For instance, train stations at Rosh HaAyin and Dimona are some 2.5 kms (1.5 miles) from the town centers. And then we wonder why people in these places don’t ride the rails.

The solution lies in locating train stations within cities, with easy, and fast, access. And this is precisely what Ofakim Mayor Zvika Gringold is trying to do, aided by Gat and Rofè. Gringold is a Yom Kippur War hero whose tiny “Zvika Force” held off hordes of Syrian tanks, for which he was awarded the Medal of Valor. He was named Ofakim mayor in August 2008 by the Interior Ministry to replace an

inept elected council.

The proposed “Ash-Bash” train line (Ashdod to Beersheba) runs through the development towns Sderot, Netivot and Ofakim. Gringold wants to put Ofakim’s train station right in the town and build a TOD neighborhood around it, including apartments, businesses and a Ben-Gurion University campus. He seeks a visionary developer to help implement the plan. If it works, the plan will attract young people, enhance land values and boost property taxes, filling Ofakim’s depleted coffers.

Peter Katz says the new TOD approach is a three-legged stool, whose ‘legs’ are compelling urban design, effective public process and better development regulations. How then should Israel change its process and laws?

I SRAEL’S PLANNING AND Construction Law (1965) created a bureaucratic three-level system for approving urban development plans that for 45 years has stalled modern urban planning in a tangle of politics and red tape. Now, the Netanyahu government has proposed a new law that will place much more control in local authorities’ hands, mandating a maximum of 90 days for local planning boards to approve submitted plans and streamlining the process. But the proposal created a firestorm of controversy, with appeals to the Supreme Court and opposition from environmental groups, who oppose abolishing planning bodies charged with protecting coastal areas and agricultural land from development.

Fundamentally, the planning process under the new law will remain adversarial, setting up negative ‘targets’ for opponents to shoot at, rather than positive ‘models’ ordinary people to seek. And by becoming more local, it may make local planning boards a juicy source of patronage and cronyism.

Peter Katz suggests a different process. Mobilize neighborhood groups to say how they would like their neighborhood to look, then integrate their ideas, and create winning

master plans. This process is highly visual, with groups posting drawings and pictures on walls that reflect their thinking. The results are then quickly integrated and combined by experts into development plans. Katz says he and others have applied this method with success in the U.S. He notes that in an era when deficit-ridden central governments are slashing grants to local government, TOD is a way to enhance local property values and raise revenues.

We heard some electrifying news at the conference. Israel Railroads planning VP Yariv Katz told the gathering that within five years, some 480 km (288 miles) of Israel’s 1,000 km (600 miles) of rail lines will be electric, with electric engines replacing diesel. This is good news. Electricity generated by natural gas replaces diesel pollution and improves air quality.

In the West, asthma is on the rise. In the U.S. and the U.K., one child in five has asthma, and in Canada, one in six. And Israel is catching up. A recent study by the Health Ministry, the Clalit HMO and the University of Haifa studied 3,922 children in Haifa and surrounding towns. One in six had asthma, more than double the national average (one in 14). The alleged culprit: Haifa Bay industries’ air pollution. I wonder whether car exhausts play a role, too. TOD is a partial solution, especially with electric train engines replacing polluting car engines.

Archaeologists and anthropologists claim that some 40,000 years ago, a wondrous thing occurred. Homo sapiens began to create things of beauty, like drawings on the walls of caves, using their imaginations. Only humans have imaginations. Animals lack them.

Why has this imaginative process seemingly halted, when it comes to planning the neighborhoods we live in? Have we lost our city planning imagination? Can we revive it in Israel? And can we enlist John Lennon, Peter Katz, the New Urbanism and TOD to unchain our lives from the tyranny of cars? ●

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