
Four Commentaries on the Charter

Andrew Seidel, M.C.P., Ph.D.

Department of Environmental
Design & Planning, State
University of New York at
Buffalo, Buffalo, N.Y. 14214, USA

This document must be considered a curious hybrid in the history of philosophies of architecture and town planning. When viewed as a whole it represents both the so-called traditional approach to architectural decision making as well as calls for the introduction of new approaches to the design process. It is, however, didactic and arrogant, forming decisions based apparently upon political and social belief rather than evidence, while at the same time calling for an approach to architectural decision making that introduces the increased use of the products of research and other sources of information. Interestingly, its arrogance of certainty is oriented directly at the social concerns which it decries as having been handled so heavy-handedly in the past. Its acknowledgement that research-produced evidence should be included in the architectural decision making process focuses only on technology. For an unstated reason, its framers were willing to accept advice on technological concerns but felt fully knowledgeable in the area of social concerns. This must be considered intriguing since, when one reviews the research literature, one can only conclude that our technological knowledge is much more fully developed.

Looking at some examples, the framers of the Charter of Machu Picchu quite clearly recognized that the application of technology "should be the realistic result of serious research and experimentation. . . ." But when one turns to social concerns, these same individuals seem much less in need of anyone else's (perhaps) more informed and devel-

oped conclusions from serious research and experimentation. One need only look as far as the Charter's section on housing to see evidence of this contradiction. The Charter calls for the use of housing "as a powerful tool for fostering social development," and for the "creative participation" of housing users "in design as well as construction." It is hard to deny the obvious high-minded objectives of such statements. But the research literature is rampant with examples of how these *statements* are really *questions* that are not so easily answered. Social development is an extremely broad concept which, in addition to a lack of consensus on appropriate directions, may not be completely within the knowledge areas that the physically oriented town planner, to whom this Charter is primarily addressed, can substantially effect.

We are still only beginning to learn how to effectively and creatively implement user participation in planning design and construction. Many failures of user participation resulted when the only guidance the architects or planners were given was to go out and "do it!" The framers of the Charter should readily admit that the architect brings to the planning and design process some expertise that the average participant does not. The question of how to combine the expertise of the architect with the needs and aspirations of the user is still being tested.

Just as the framers of the Charter call for research advancing technology, they should also call for the continuance of social research. To simply cry that certain things *must* be done, that certain paths *must* be followed—particularly when some of these paths have already proven sufficiently problematic and others appear promising and thus warrant further investigation—should be considered a less than adequate response. To do this for some concerns and not for others, when bodies of researched evidence are developing in each area, is yet worse.

John Gibson, AIA

Bohlen Meyer Gibson &
Associates, 6435 Castleway
Drive, Suite 104, Indianapolis,
Ind. 46250, USA

Those who attended the HABITAT Conference in Vancouver in 1976 will recall that many of the concerns of that conference are reflected in the Charter of Machu Picchu. Discussions were prevalent in the areas of over-population, ecology, energy resources, food supply, available land, medical care, and education. Unfortunately the components of that particular conference did not carry forth and pursue possible solutions to some of these problems, much to the disappointment of such partici-

pants as Margaret Mead. It is regrettable that she is not alive today because I would like to have her comments on the Charter of Machu Picchu. She was quite concerned about many of the issues brought forth in the Charter.

If we read or listen to the media, most of the issues in the Charter are not new concerns. Possibly an advantage to the Charter is that it puts forth these items of concern in a document prepared by educators and practitioners in the fields of architecture, planning, and urban history.

One current and related concern in this country is the enigma of the energy situation. This problem could create a whole change in what are being proposed as possible solutions to urban transportation, pollution, and our general standard of living. If one considers those aspects of personal space, personalization, privacy, and control of one's own destiny,

it is not hard to understand the popularity of the automobile. It is difficult to believe that mass transportation will ever become somewhat acceptable except where it likewise becomes mandatory, although there are some existing situations where mass transportation facilities recently constructed are seemingly successful. If people are once given a chance to satisfy a human need through the affluence of our society, will they digress to a restricted system? Architects can design parking lots or mass transportation terminals, but the social scientists will have to tell us which it is to be. Or will the world energy crisis tell us what it is to be?

Some of the issues in this Charter can be solved by researching human behavior; we can establish architectural and urban planning design guidelines that will help solve these problems by starting with the needs of the human and building from that

**Wolfgang F. E. Preiser, M.Arch.,
Ph.D.**

**School of Architecture &
Planning, University of New
Mexico, 2414 Central, S.E.,
Albuquerque, N.M. 87131, USA**

As is the case with similar global statements and charters, the Charter of Machu Picchu raises the question of whether rather comfortable, elitist architects express their idiosyncratic perceptions, or the values of deprived classes and affected urbanites whose lot they claim to be concerned with. After all, it took considerable funds to transport the Charter's authors from the United States and elsewhere to Lima, Peru. The combined effort of South and North American architects which resulted in the Charter of Machu Picchu is disconcerting at best, since it is not clear whether the built environment problems of highly industrialized countries or those of less developed countries are addressed. While it is claimed that the issues presented pertain to most countries in the world, a more differentiated presentation by countries, continents, levels of civilizatory development, etc., would have been more beneficial. An example may be the documents which emanated from the deliberations of the Club of Rome.¹ This is to say that architects from nations other than those in North and South America should have been included in drafting a charter which purports to be valid for the entire world.

One basic weakness of the charter is that it addresses itself to urban areas while entirely ignoring rural regions, where some of the gravest problems exist regarding the quality of human habitation.

It is difficult to disagree with most of the items contained in the Charter of Machu Picchu, except that in some cases no directions or solutions to

point. It is indeed this open-ended process, stated in the Charter as incompleteness, which brings the issue home to this architect. It should be done, not by imitation of what has been done before, but by starting at the beginning, brand new, with the human as an individual, and eventually as a social group. Working in this direction we can work around those variable issues of energy, ecology, transportation, over-population, housing, preservation, urban growth, etc. cited in the Charter.

It has been observed that architects in the United States seemed to ignore the Charter of Athens, or show cynicism or indifference. This Charter may similarly turn off some architectural readers. Maybe American indifference to the Charter of Athens, or to this Charter, is corollary to the present indifference or turn-off most Americans exhibit toward the energy crisis.

problems are offered. For example, the statement that "as the numbers of people increase, the quality of life declines" is rather superficial, and probably refers to poor nations only. No suggestion is made concerning appropriate action to be taken. Are urban planners of the future going to dispense birth control pills? What remedy, if any, is on the horizon to combat urban growth?

Value changes are indicated for capitalist societies if some of the Charter statements are to be implemented. They include integrated, multifunctional environments; user participation in housing design; subordination of the private automobile to mass transit; subordination of private land use to the public interest; reduced dependency on technology in lighting, heating, and cooling space, and more. The statements refer to issues found primarily in highly industrialized nations, and thus they amount to an agenda for environmental design research and public education. Toward the end of the Charter some architectural and less global principles are listed, such as "the reunification of structural engineering with architecture" and "the disarticulation of the traditional building-box." Again, without basic changes in value orientations concerning land and the built environment, these statements will remain wishful thinking.

The demise of modern architecture and urban planning has been treated extensively by Blake² and Brodin³ among others. The question arises as to what good charters and manifestos do. In its present form, the Charter of Machu Picchu is but a sketchy outline of an agenda which requires detailed elaboration and adaptation to specific, local contexts. Solutions to the problems addressed lie in the arena of environmental politics, and not in the hands of architects. Since changes proposed in the Charter of Machu Picchu are rather non-specific as compared to the Charter of Athens, the probability of its affecting the built environment during the next 45 years is very small indeed.

References

1. Laszlo, Ervin, *Goals for mankind*. New York: Dutton, 1977.
 2. Blake, Peter, *Form follows fiasco: Why modern architecture hasn't worked*. Boston: Atlantic/Little Brown and Co., 1977.
 3. Brolin, Brent, *The failure of modern architecture*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976.
-

David M. Pellish, AIA

**Demonstration Program Branch,
U.S. Department of Energy, 20
Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Mail
Stop 2221 C, Washington, D.C.
20545, USA**

The Charter of Machu Picchu is quite disappointing as a statement of the fundamental principles required for this generation to improve human settlements. Having reviewed the experiences and consequences of urban development (and deterioration) in the 44-year interval since the Charter of Athens, it is difficult to comprehend how that distinguished group meeting in Peru in December, 1977, failed to recognize the extremely critical issues confronting our cities that must be resolved in the planning process *before physical design!*

The prospect of rapidly depleting sources of energy within this generation's lifetime certainly cannot be ignored—nor given mere nodding acknowledgement in passing. Profound changes in urban life-styles must be anticipated and planned for within the next twenty years. Fundamental reversals in urban sprawl patterns are inevitable when cars will not have sufficient gas supplies. But what are we to do to meet the daily needs of the poor millions in underdeveloped countries who depend upon kerosene or depleting wood supplies to heat their daily meals or to warm their hovels? Surely

any "charter" on urban problems cannot ignore such critical issues that will affect *all* cities in the foreseeable future.

After spending hundreds of millions of dollars and several decades in handsomely conceived urban renewal projects, with the declared intent of preserving the urban core through physical design, American central cities continue to be in deep trouble. Mounting pressures of social discontent, causing structurally healthy neighborhoods to deteriorate rapidly and physically sound housing to be abandoned—during periods of critical housing shortages—must certainly be addressed by those reviewing the earlier C.I.A.M. reply to that burning question: "Can Our Cities Survive?"

These are but a few illustrations of the disappointing character of the Machu Picchu principles. It has been fashionable for too long to repeat platitudes concerning "interdisciplinary approaches" to improving the built environment. Nevertheless, the Peru statement failed to acknowledge the intent of those timeworn clichés, which is: social scientists and technologists must be in the lead team—as equal partners! It is unfortunate that the glorious opportunity to view historic trends from the clear-aided mountain top of that noble city of Machu Picchu was permitted to return to the same myopic and insensitive perspective of the physical design purists that has diminished the credibility of architects and planners among those seeking leadership in this critical period. **JAR**