

Opening session of the Symposium



Fig. 1: Professor Suzanne Keller, WSE President and Chair of the session delivering her introductory statement.



Fig. 2: The audience at the Opening Session of the Symposium.

Globalization and local identity

Introductory statement by the WSE President

Suzanne Keller

*The author, President of the World Society for Ekistics, has served as Professor of Sociology at Princeton University for more than three decades, specializing in the study of Elites and Leadership, Urbanism, and Social Architecture (for the School of Architecture). An early Ekistician, she taught architects and planners at the Athens Center of Ekistics and was part of the overall research program. The goal to have a sociologist play such a central role during those formative years of ekistics was to expand the perspective of architects, planners, and builders to include sociological and psychological concepts and ideas. The recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, she is the author of a leading textbook in Sociology, *The Urban Neighborhood* (Random House, 1968) actually begun in Athens, and most recently, *Community, Pursuing the Dream, Living the Reality* (Princeton University Press, 2004) which received the Amalfi Prize of 2005. She is currently at work on *Adult, that is Retirement Communities*. The text that follows is an introductory statement to the international symposium on *Globalization and Local Identity*, organized jointly by the World Society for Ekistics and the University of Shiga Prefecture in Hikone, Japan, 19-24 September, 2005.*

A big theme lies before us at this meeting of the World Society for Ekistics in Hikone, Japan. The twin poles of globalism and localism should engage us and provoke a lively discussion.

Every major social process adds a new vocabulary to the language. Globalism is such an addition. The term has spread like wildfire across the world as if the word itself would create the emerging reality it purports to describe.

Globalism has been likened to an irresistible force smashing national boundaries, overturning established patterns of thought and conduct. By transforming both rich and poor nations, it promises to create enormous wealth for some and leave "great furrows of wreckage" for others.¹

By bringing a wide range of societies into contact, new economic opportunities arise along with challenges to traditional institutions and established practices. Thus, whether one sees the glass as half-empty or half-full, uncertainty permeates a world in flux.

The global economy which expands horizons as it shrinks distances is generally acknowledged to be, at this point in time, essentially an anarchic system without widely shared cultural anchors.

Many are adrift and rudderless – the young especially – as they search for opportunity and identity. Identity is one major casualty of the global sweep.

Indeed, one response to the ensuing upheaval and disorientation is to turn to ethnic, racial, or religious roots to rekindle a sense of safety and belonging. But along with this return to pri-

mal ties there is the breakdown of larger loyalties and affiliations.

Thus as a new cultural mosaic takes shape together with the ethnic, religious, and subcultural politics on which it rests, we note the re-emergence of local symbols and sentiments to rally local loyalties. This overturns the "modern project" and the enlightenment ideals of universalism and transcendence.

Such a turning away from the megasociety is a major and problematic outcome of globalism, one unforeseen by the prophets of progress and unlimited growth.

The connection between localism and globalism occurs right here – in the interface between a sprawling, uncharted cyberspace and small, bounded communities that pull away from it. It denotes a divisive tension between local and global, between a lived-in, culturally unifying reality and one marked by specialization and fragmentation. A sense of wholeness is offered by the one, a sense of virtually limitless possibility by the other. Thus while globalism promises undreamed-of wealth to many, it leaves many more without a moral compass, marginalized, detached from community, alienated and powerless.

Localism is sustained by the human need for security, identity, and a sense of attachment and belonging not otherwise available. And the wider, universal culture is dependent on this search for meaningful connection to achieve its own goals.

One recurrent question in this connection is whether communities require a turf or territory or whether they can be constituted independent of these.

To my mind, territory is indeed indispensable and electronic networks cannot, therefore, lay claim to the term "community." Even the brief comparison that follows makes clear that they lack most of the essential characteristics of community, including collective rules, a sense of mutual responsibility across time, as well as shared values and traditions. There is no stability in a "virtual" community as participants can change their identities as they please. And while "real" communities are nurtured by familiarity, reciprocity, and trust, "virtual" communities exalt anonymity and the freedom to sign on and off at will, thereby making their collective features transient and episodic.

Trust and sharing, essential to sustain "real" communities, are hardly possible when participants never meet face to face and have no reliable basis for judging each other's conduct and priorities.

"Virtual" communication is of course also a form of connectedness, one offering escape from isolation for social hermits, shut-ins, and individuals cut off from normal social relationships. But such networks bank on instantaneous and sporadic, not continuous, exchange. This is not the soil needed for community to grow. Thus, whatever its virtues, "virtual" connectedness cannot replace actual communities. Far from being anachronistic or superfluous, community seems more necessary as global-

ism spreads. By offering security, identity, and a sense of belonging and wholeness, communities can enrich the technological megaliths that dominate the landscape. This is what the German poet, Hans Magnus Enzensberger implies when he notes that the more global and uniform our civilization, the more the people want to anchor themselves in their own locales. The two are linked.

Ekisticians are well-suited for pursuing such linkages and building bridges between them.

Arnold Toynbee² the noted British historian was an early disciple of Ekistics. He considered it “the common ground and natural meeting place” of many disciplines and perspectives generally isolated from one another. He specifically cites the contributions of architecture, town planning, communications theory, economics, sociology, psychology, medicine, and biology.

In this he echoed the sentiments of C.A. Doxiadis, the pioneering spirit of Ekistics who was ahead of his time in his efforts to link local and global in a single universe. The City of the Future project explored the progression towards the huge scales of a world society in the making, while the Human Community Project was concerned with how to define, preserve, and design for the human scale.

In a remarkable leap of imagination, Doxiadis urged specialists to become generalists, and future Ekisticians to think more expansively about the world they will live in.

I would certainly echo these sentiments. Globalism, driven by economic and technological forces seems here to stay. But its fate may well be shaped by local attachments and allegiances.

Ekisticians draw on the work of many – architects and builders, planners and artists, philosophers and social thinkers – in their quest to move towards the promising but also precarious future. They have a vital role to play in building and rebuilding the human habitat.

These are some of my thoughts as we turn to the work at hand in Hikone, Japan.

Notes

1. William Greider, *One World Ready or Not, The Manic Logice of Global Capitalism* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1997).
2. Arnold Toynbee, *Cities on the Move* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970).