

Local voices in city politics

*Cooperation is replacing confrontation
in Chicago neighbourhood politics.*

JAMES TROXEL

Sociology professors used to tell us that “demography is destiny.” While the urban centres of the world are still defining the economic and cultural standards of living, politically the world is still organized on an agrarian pattern. International development agency programs are biased toward the rural. Provincial and state government realities—created in an agrarian age when ownership of land formed the basis of citizenship—still define the dominant political framework. “Upstate” is pitted against “downstate.”

The recent problems of the American city have given rise to a new sociological vocabulary: the “new urban gover-

ty” of the “permanent underclass.”

The challenge to governing the 21st century city seem insurmountable. Are our future cities even governable? Or does a new polity framework need to be built to view urban issues from a different perspective? Can we redefine the borders of our political imagination in order to gain fresh insight?

I believe so and want to share some working urban solutions that we’ve assisted here in Chicago. They could turn out to be elements of the new polity framework of cities. There are five:

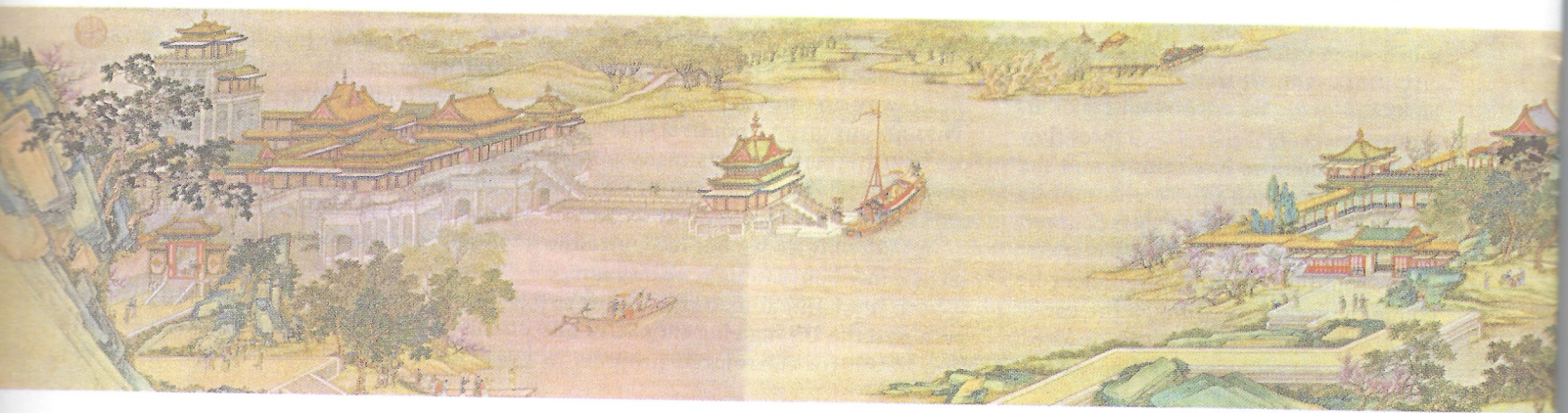
- an increase in participative democracy at the local level—the neighbourhood
- the formation of coalitions of successful neighborhood ventures
- the increase in authentic citizen participation formats
- the recovery of the role of the public servant within government
- the pressure for regional models of the polis.

I. NEIGHBOURHOODS TAKING CHARGE

I learned a very important lesson about sustainable development in the Fifth City community on Chicago’s west side many years ago. We were working with the owner of a small grocery store trying to increase its sales. It had plenty of customers but they were buying only about \$1.60 per visit.

We believed that if we could get the customers to buy more by reducing the cost of each item, overall sales would go up. So we worked long and hard to get the store into a cooperative buying program. Finally we succeeded and waited for sales to go up. The per visit purchases did increase, but the store wasn’t doing any better. Why? Fewer customers were walking through the doors. Where did the customers go? Most had been loyal from the store’s opening.

It dawned on us as we looked around the neighbour-



hood. By the time we got the new pricing strategy in place, fewer people were actually living within proximity of the store. What had happened? Over the years the community lost population as the large apartment houses slowly went into decay. How did that happen, since the buildings were largely government subsidized? Since the subsidized rent payments in turn supported a government-backed mortgage, when the government was slow to pay, repairs came slower and mortgages fell into delinquency. It was a strangely closed system: the government defaulted on the government, increasing the numbers of homeless. This pattern has happened too often to count. But why couldn't the tenants pay the rent themselves rather than relying on subsidies? The loss of industry meant fewer jobs—leaving fewer incomes in the community.

To put it another way, we learned the symbiotic relationship among the various sectors of the community: the stores need the customers, the banks need the deposits, the home owners need the mortgages, the families need the jobs, the people need the products and services. Promoting the idea of shopping locally, banking locally, employing locally, lending and borrowing locally will do a great deal to improve the economic self-sufficiency of the neighbourhood. When this cycle of funds is jeopardized, local communities suffer from forces beyond their control.

Fortunately, in Chicago we've been able to conserve the outflow of funds in many neighbourhoods. Working closely with Chicago's Department of Economic Development, we have assisted about 70 local development organizations—merchants associations and community-based organizations—to begin to formulate strategies to counter these adverse trends. We develop within these neighbourhood groups a capacity to think strategically about their areas. The foremost strategy in nearly each case is to build a stronger bond between the retail commercial sector of the

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community and the residents—its natural customer base. Call it a localized version of “being close to the customer”; it has paid off.

There is also a new awareness of the interdependence between the industrial and educational sectors in finding effective micro solutions to macro problems. When the business leaders got on board the education reform wagon in Chicago, the legislative package was easily passed. Its major provision has been to create locally elected local school councils (LSCs) to decentralize the oppressive school bureaucracy. Last spring, staff of the ICA assisted 29 such LSCs in forming their school improvement plans. “School-based management” is fast becoming another way for allowing local people to solve their own problems and to control their own destiny. Business leaders are banking on this approach because they need an employable workforce in order to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

The good news is that success stories of local groups abound in Chicago and elsewhere. The key has been the use of highly participative neighbourhood democracies. To be optimally effective, they need to encompass all sectors within the community.



How do isolated success stories coagulate to reach some form of critical mass to make a long-term difference on a much broader scale?

II. THE NEW COALITIONS

With the political expectations of successful local efforts on the rise, community activists want more responsiveness from city government; they will not tolerate patronizing efforts by city officials. Chicago neighbourhood groups banded together to educate and support themselves, and to advocate new city-wide policies and programs. Currently coalitions of groups are forming around issues like housing, jobs, recycling, school reform, day care and economic development.

One group we've worked with for the last ten years is the Chicago Association of Neighbourhood Development Organizations (CANDO). CANDO represents nearly 100 local groups trying to strengthen their neighbourhood economies and the city as a whole. We've facilitated their annual Board retreat almost every year since they began. CANDO is considered by some the strongest such group in the US.

Two years ago CANDO took an innovative but dangerous new step: to advocate a sophisticated ten-point political platform to implement programs that supported neighbourhood development. The platform included an economic development bond, a general obligation bond, a community land trust, the use of government employee pension funds to back neighbourhood projects, the strategic use of new taxing districts, and the floating of federal entitlement dollars as a financing tool. CANDO members met with their local aldermen, held neighbourhood rallies and initiated a public relations campaign. Their main concern was to assist in clarifying the values that guide Chicago's development and to make the case that the neighbourhoods deserve as much attention as the downtown "Loop."

"Has CANDO become a political party?" "Does its leader want to become mayor?" These are the kinds of questions observers ask. They are natural questions, especially when

seen from the old adversarial paradigm that has permeated the relations between City Hall and the neighbourhoods since Saul Alinsky's early community organizing efforts. But these questions miss the point.

Coalitions of neighbourhood groups form a valuable counter-balance—an alternative polity—to the established structures and can hold them effectively accountable. These coalitions are not in themselves the new urban political paradigm, but they provide a portent of the future. Empowering local people at all levels of the political process and unleashing this new energy into channels of expression are shaking the old foundations.

Can this new energy be mainstreamed into the political process through citizen participation avenues?

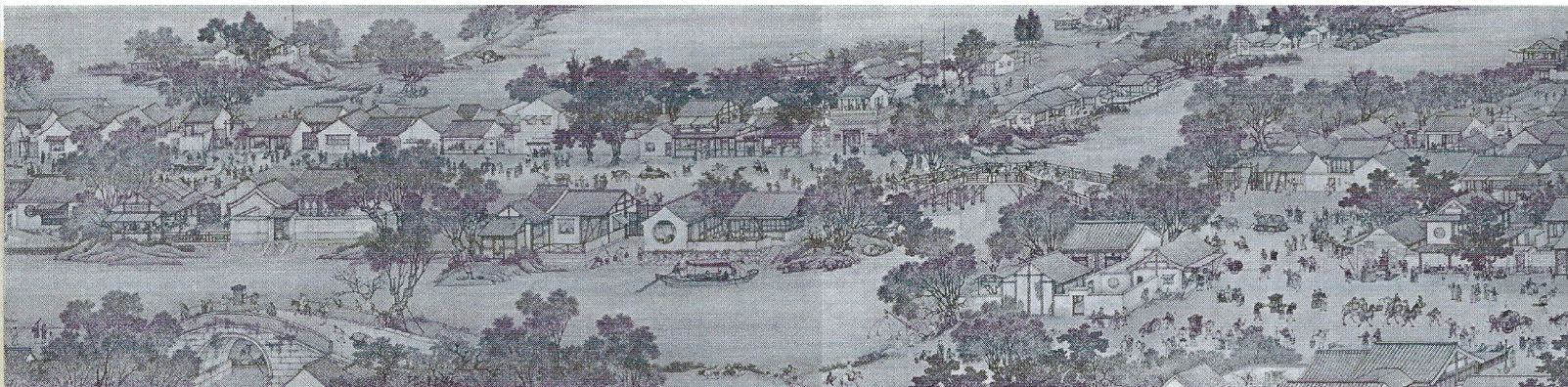
III. CITIZENS FORMING PUBLIC POLICY

In the 60s, citizen participation became one of the hallmarks of the new government assistance programs. For every program, a "citizen advisory board" seemed to come into being to monitor it. Formal public hearings to review major development plans became common. It appeared as if the old adage, "You can't fight City Hall," was crumbling.

However, too frequently, these citizen groups were bankrupted by the process, coopted by political forces, or mesmerized by the complexity of the bureaucracy they were charged to monitor. The political equation merely added another subset; the formula stayed the same.

Authentic citizen participation, however, can make a difference, as we observed during the administration of the late mayor, Harold Washington. Encouraged by increasing numbers of community planning efforts, city planners embarked upon an innovative attempt to create a master development plan. The process peaked with a citizen conference of 300 people that ICA facilitated. An initial draft of the plan had been created. The conference was to ask the participants to confirm the overall goals of the plan, to infuse the goals with suggested specific accomplishments, and then to envision implementation possibilities. The participants af-

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firmed five goals:

1. increase job opportunities
2. promote balanced growth (between downtown and the neighbourhoods)
3. assist neighbourhood development
4. encourage cultural development
5. provide quality education.

The conference exposed an intriguing public planning and policy question—how does the city balance locally initiated plans, proposals and implementation with a more comprehensive view of development plans? How can the city deal with raised expectations resulting from real citizen participation? One aspect of the issue is clear: while the experimentation with how to tap people's wisdom and input will continue, an educational component is needed so that participants can consider the ability to deliver on those expectations. One of the things we learned is that, to create a context, citizen input should initially focus on city-wide concerns before looking at the parts. Perspective is required. Otherwise attention is focussed on getting a bigger piece of (a seemingly shrinking) pie.

Another important element of citizen participation is to insist that people also struggle with how to implement their proposals, so they experience the incredible complexity of large urban structures dealing with those proposals.

The bottom-up approach to planning puts pressure on the upper levels to respond. There are always frustrations along the way: cynicism about local people's capacity to build realistic models, difficulties with ineffective "Robert's Rules of Order" meetings which kill the spirit; the persistence of backroom deal-making, the presumed adversarial approach to dealing with people who have different opinions. But common ground is being found, and many experiments have proved that one of the keys to urban polity is increased citizen participation at all levels of city planning.

But will the public servants, especially the bureaucrats, give way to increased citizen and community input or will they succumb to their fear of a sense of loss of power?

IV. RECOVERING PUBLIC SERVICE: WHAT OF THE BUREAUCRATS?

The 1980s witnessed a decreasing support of cities by the American federal government. No one felt the "doing more

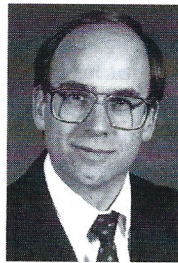
with less" stress more than the dedicated city workers themselves. Many times the reduction in the funding of social programs led to an increase in the complexity of administering the fewer assistance dollars. When that happened, the number of program administrators sometimes increased in inverse proportion to the number of program beneficiaries. Something was wrong with the way government was doing its business.

But there are some indications of wanting to do things differently. A couple of years ago we were asked to train city employees to facilitate six citizen input sessions on the city's Capital Improvement Budget. These funds are used to keep the city's infrastructure functioning. Funds are supposed to be used equitably around the city, with some targeted to where they get the most bang for the buck—for example, big ticket items such as O'Hare Airport, one of the city's biggest generators of tax revenue and jobs.

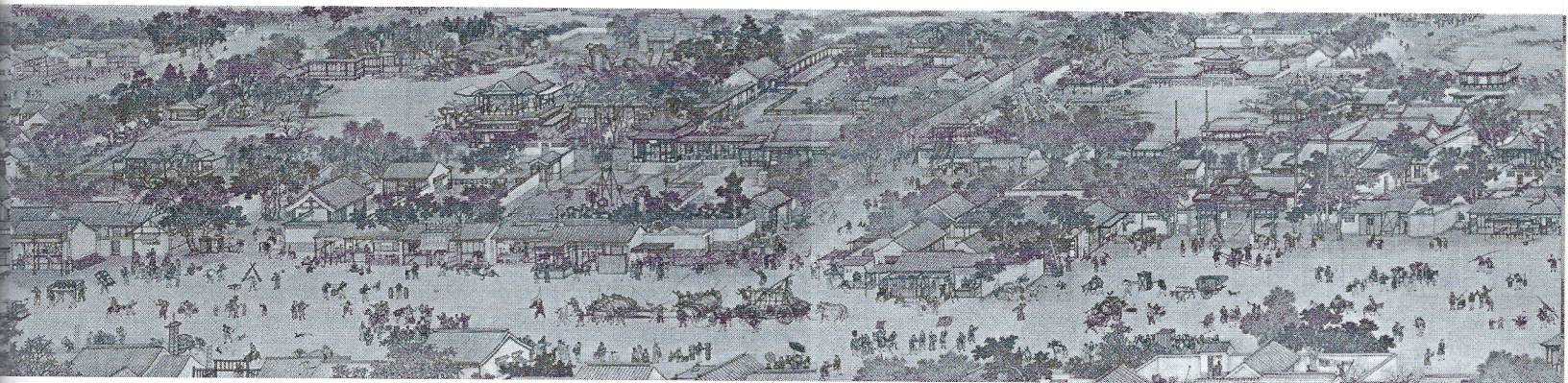
Apprehension sped through our veins. I had trained some city government people who had become pretty good facilitators, but never crusty veterans of Streets and Sanitation or Public Works. These guys were engineers who dealt with "hard" issues, leaving the "soft" people issues to others.

The first session was held on the west side of Chicago (God, why the west side first? Doesn't everybody know they demand the most because they've been left out the longest?) Just to compound the "expect nothing" sentiment, a couple of elected aldermen showed up. No way this thing was going to work, right?

Wrong! Talk about non-defensive openness! No ques-



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tion was trite. No idea was stupid. Everyone had a chance to talk. Questions were answered without evasion. The public servants listened more than they talked. When it came time to evaluate the meeting, several facilitators spoke of how these meetings had changed their view of their role in government.

Transformation of public service organizations and the people within them is another key to transforming urban polity. Renewal may be pressured from the outside, but finally comes about from within. Unless those involved in the day-to-day implementation of public policy see their role as guardians of the public will, structural change will not long endure.

We experienced this when we were asked to work with the Children and Family Services Division of the Department of Human Services a year ago. This is the agency responsible for funding most and licensing all daycare, Headstart and preschool centres in the city, some 200 in number. The agency was formed during the Model Cities era of the early 60s and many have been there since the beginning. The cynicism attributed to bureaucratic lethargy had set in.

We held seven sessions to give each person a chance to vent frustrations. Then we facilitated a planning retreat for the agency; people were beginning to see something new was being called for.

It was at a follow-up session two months into the plan that we began to notice real changes in people. There was a liveliness we had not detected before, cheerfulness in their participation, hopefulness in their anticipations, a buoyancy that made them want to work together. Director Maria Whelan said that we had "exceeded all expectations generally associated with notions of strategic planning and moved toward what can only be described as transformation."

The task is to rebuild and reform our principal public social support systems—our public schools, our public housing and our public welfare system—by cultivating a sense of home for the future in the people who work in those agencies.

But is this enough? Isn't there something more that needs to be done to reform urban polity?

V. REGIONAL RECONCILIATION

Several years ago the daughter of an Australian colleague miserably failed a simple geography test. All she had to do

was to draw the borders of the states of Australia on an outline of the country and then to name them. When she turned in her test, the teacher could not believe her eyes. It seems my colleague's daughter had indeed divided the country into areas, but not into states; she had divided Australia into areas around the major metropolitan centres and named each by its largest city.

When the teacher asked her where on earth she had got that idea from—since her map obviously wasn't the way it is—the student replied that her Daddy had said that was the way it was going to be!

The idea of the region seems simple: overlay political form on what already exists. But "turfism" runs deep in the human psyche.

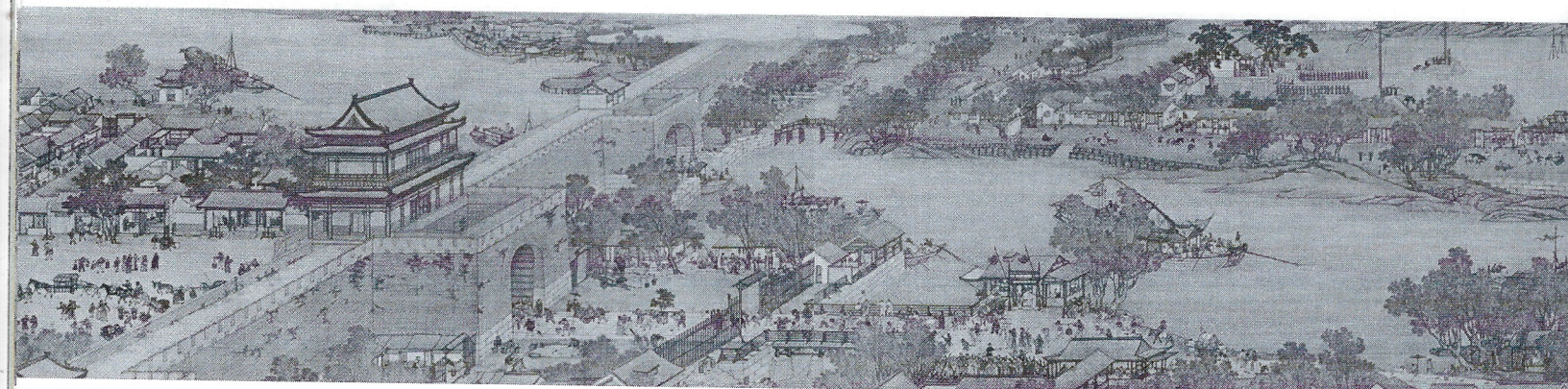
Structurally, we can image the contradiction as a mismatch between increasingly regional economic and environmental interdependence, on the one hand, and the fragmented and entrenched political jurisdictions of municipalities that make up a region, on the other. After all, isn't demography destiny?

The fact of an accidental historical boundary is absolutely meaningless in terms of how a metropolitan area needs to operate. Echoing Thomas Paine, Don Perkins of the Civic Committee of Chicago has said that "to have all these governments where everybody is protecting their own little turf means they are going to hang separately because they don't hang together."

Celebrating regional interdependence and championing the cause of equitable distribution of the resources to care for a metropolitan area's human needs is the place to begin. Suburbanites are becoming increasingly clear that they can't thrive if the inner cities are failing. A recent news poll shows suburbanites are ready to pay more taxes to help cities. Currently cities have to pay a disproportionate amount to support the infrastructure used by the whole region.

One illustration is the funding of public schools partly from property tax revenue from existing municipal districts. More children in the city have to get an education on fewer property tax dollars than children living in the suburbs. There should be a metropolitan public school taxing body that collects and distributes revenue equitably across the whole state.

We have had the privilege of facilitating planning ses-



dialogic—a reciprocity a dance back and forth, to and fro, a yin and yang, night and day, male and female.

—Rob Work, excerpted from his working paper, *Human Development and Urbanization: A Planetary Perspective*

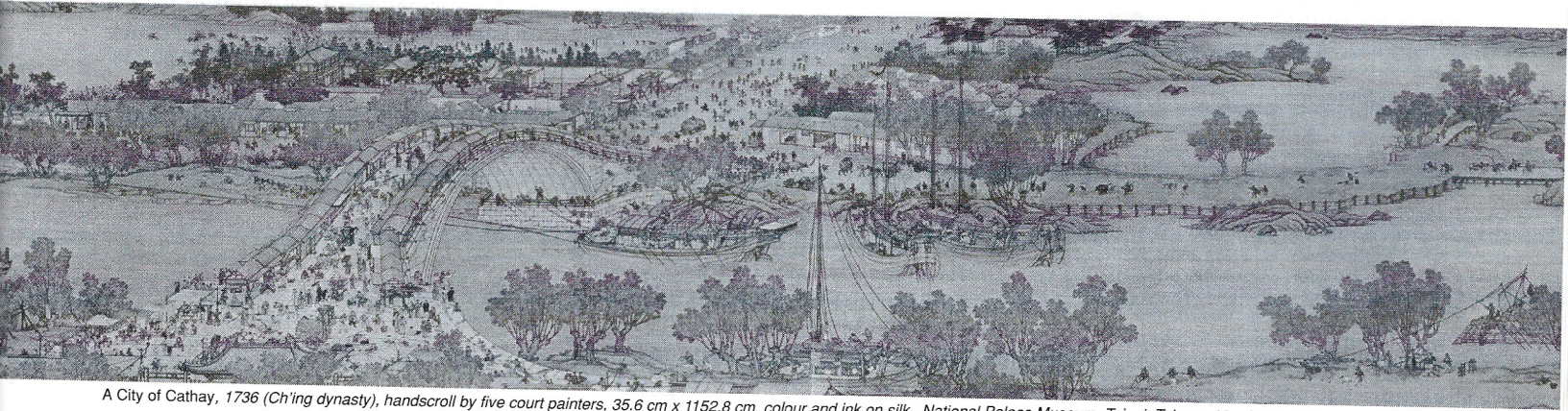
sions with several regional “mayors and managers” meetings in the Chicago metropolitan area. These cover, for example, the northwest suburban communities, the south suburban, and so forth. While we have detected a willingness to plan and coordinate together, that willingness seems to be restricted to a small area rather than the whole metropolitan area.

Imposing a regional polity structure—even if it were accepted—would not deal with the issue. What regional polity structures do exist—for example, the regional transportation authority—are driven by economics. A deeper motivation must be tapped for new political alignments or regional taxing bodies to make sense.

Political realities follow the collective public imagination. New images of regional interdependence need to be championed. Redefining the “city” to include the entire urban region was perhaps the most significant proposal to come out of a summit of 35 urban mayors meeting in New York this past November.

In our opinion, the regional approach is the leading edge of the urban polity agenda. While region-wide problems have become fairly clear, they have yet to crack archaic boundaries. Will the problems of crime, drugs, housing and other urgent issues need to become even more acute before suburbanites themselves call for more comprehensive solutions? Or is some more subtle shift underway that will make old jurisdictions simply irrelevant? Will air pollution standards require a tough regional agency? Will regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other cross-boundary coalitions emerge?

Our experience in Chicago tells us that reconciliation is the political strategy for the future of the metropolitan area: reconciling the city with the suburbs, downstate with upstate, the community activists with the established leaders, the local citizens with the public servants, the whole with the parts, the past with the future. Only a whole systems approach can bring about a new urban polity. Much more experimentation in new forms is needed. ❖



A City of Cathay, 1736 (Ch'ing dynasty), handscroll by five court painters, 35.6 cm x 1152.8 cm, colour and ink on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan. 12 of 16 sections are shown here.