

Call Number: 02-00-36

A Conference on the Future of Alaska – Brooking Institute

Summary created by: Jacob Metoxen

Date of creation of summary: 3/13/2013

Notes: Original on 7 inch reel. Master copy on CD.

A man says thank you John [Eberhard]. Eberhard discusses the weather in Buffalo and how it is colder than Anchorage. Eberhard says that he wants to talk about technology and the urbanization of Alaska. The man says he must begin by telling a story about how decisions are sometimes made in this context. The story he tells is about Moses [From the Bible] and the difficult decisions he had to make. The man tells a joke about Moses parting the Red Sea including engineers, architects, lawyers, and public relations representatives [The crowd laughs]. He is explaining some of the context about what he is going to discuss to the crowd. The man's school [The State University of New York] where he is dean called the School of Architecture and Environmental Design. He started the first course last year for undergraduates called the Introductory to Environmental Design. The first day, the word 'environment' was defined by using a definition by an architect named Buckminster Fuller. Fuller defines environment as "Everything that is not 'me.'" The man says we can subdivide everything that is not 'me' into two types of environments. One is the environment that is not there, which is what God made. The other is everything that Man makes. He says when we talk about the design of environment, he presumes as Joyce Kilmer discussed a long time ago that "Only God can make a tree." Therefore, while we as man might despoil that environment, we can't make that environment. What we can do is make an environment for ourselves to provide places of safety, comfort, enjoyment, and a celebration of life. Design is a conscious activity of man and therefore man, Eberhard would argue, is involved in making that environment. The environment that Eberhard would like to talk about in the next couple of days is the man made environment. More and more that manmade environment tends to be done in an urban context. He says that designing a manmade environment and means an understanding of the process of making it. The process of making it that he wants to use to define the word technology. Technology has three definitions in his dictionary. Eberhard prefers the third. "Technology is the sum of the ways by which a society provides itself with material objects." It is not the objects themselves, but the sum of the ways by which we make those things. Those ways of creating those things are intellectual ways, machine tool ways; it's the sum of those ways. It's clear then that technology is not something that is new. He says there are new technologies but technology has always been here. Eberhard believes technology can be talked about at a level of a state. He says that he will discuss what opportunities there are for Alaska technology wise at his speech the following day. He says unlike Mr. Higbee, he wants to discuss what the options are for Alaska, not what Alaska should do. Technology resides in four different elements in this society. These elements are: men who are skilled in the use of technology, the institutions or organizations that employ skilled people, the resources available to a technological effort, and the rules/regulations/and traditions that govern the relationship between man/institutions/and

resources. He discusses the carpenters union. Eberhard asks the question “What is it that we make when we make an urban place?” Eberhard says there are people like Mel Webber, who sometimes speaks for John, that argue the city as a notion is obsolete and that the boundaries of a political explanation of a city is a false notion. Eberhard thinks that is reasonable. He says that places usually have a notion about them that may represent a historical representation of the place or what we imagine the place will be like. He says we have lost that in a lot of cities in the lower 48 but there is an institution that preserves that, sports teams. The city’s image is somewhat preserved by the football team or the baseball team. He says he remembers when he was a boy there an amateur hour called “Major Bowes Amateur Hour.” Whenever someone would go on the show and say they were from Brooklyn, there was always a loud cheer. Not because they were from Brooklyn, but because Brooklyn Dodgers were the team. He says there are images people have of the lower 48 about what words like Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Nome mean. He wonders if Alaskans take those views into consideration when building and using technology in the cities. Eberhard discusses that boundaries don’t have to be limited to cities, but instead the boundaries of the entire state of Alaska. He says that the analogy of viewing a city as a living organism is true because if we were given the technology to view a place from above, Alaska would look like a living thing. He wants to differentiate between the hardware and software systems of the city. Eberhard wants to present the notion that there are hardware issues and software systems of the city. Software systems go by such titles as healthcare systems, education systems, commercial systems, systems of justice. Hardware is school buildings, buses, textbooks, desks, and the people who operate them. The point Eberhard wants to make is that there is a dependency of the hardware system and what it is able to do with the software systems. Eberhard says most people that he knows who are concerned about the different systems assume implicitly that the hardware isn’t going to change. He says people assume the hardware will remain the same so the real problem to work on is the software problem. He says “What can we do to change the role of teacher and student to one another?” Eberhard wants to argue that that is a limited and shortsighted view.

At 24:45 Eberhard says “Let me use this simple illustration.” He explains that if 100 years ago there was a meeting like the one people are currently at, and people were concerned with healthcare in the city, particularly with epidemics, part of the problem would be to try and get more stocks of drugs around the city to fight the epidemic, to get more physicians trained, to beef up the public health service etc., assuming that there would be no change in the hardware of the cities. What in fact happened within the next 30 years plumbing was invented so instead of outhouses storing human wastes, hydraulic systems were put into houses. He says that indoor plumbing had more effect on epidemics than any other invention at that time. Eberhard says he doesn’t know one major corporation in the United States that is trying to advance urban hardware. They want to build better things than what we already have. There is one exception and that is in the area of pollution. Eberhard says there are some hardware experiments being performed in that area. He says to take a systems view is not only useful, but necessary. If we look at our urban context, the man made hardware, he believes that each part is dependent on another. He then compares the body system to the city system. He classifies movement systems into three categories; one of those is what makes movement by foot possible, transporting systems, and movement conduit. One example of a movement conduit is the Alaska oil pipeline. He says the oil pipeline is part of the cardio system that is going to make Alaska tick. The second system is

the nervous system and the information communications network. Part of the nervous system has to do with something that isn't very systematically looked at, mainly how does someone going into that context for the first time get information how to use it? Eberhard says he showed up at the airport and got a ride from a taxi driver who had just moved to Anchorage two days ago from Texas and the taxi driver didn't know where anything was except fortunate for Eberhard, the Captain Cook hotel. Eberhard said he made an experiment when he was in New York city. He walked out of the hotel and said he was going to try and see what kind of information New York would give him to get from his hotel to Grand Central Station, "or excuse me, to Pennsylvania Station" because he had a ticket in his pocket that said to Pennsylvania Railroad. He said he had a reasonable assumption that the Pennsylvania Railroad operates out of Penn Station. He said he wasn't going to use a cab because that would be cheating. His hotel was on 57th street and he knew that Penn Station was on 34th street. One of the things he had going for him was that if he walked from 57th street to 56th street he could depend on the next one being 55th. He walked over and got the information IRT and BMT. He asked a man from Des Moines, Iowa and that man didn't know. The next man he asked didn't speak English. On the bus there was a map with different locations such as Gramercy Park. One advantage Eberhard said he had as an architect was that he knew what Penn Station looked like. He said he walked into Penn Station and showed his ticket to a man and the man said he was in the wrong station, that train leaves from Grand Central Station. He found a sign that read IRT and BMT and went to ask a girl who was selling tickets and as Arlo Guthrie [Musician] says, "There was a handmade sign" that the girl had made. The sign said to take the train to Time Square and take the shuttle.

At 46:20 he begins talking about the third system, the metabolic system. The metabolic system of the city provides the city with energy to restore or create new surfaces. Huge quantities of input go into it every day: food, water, and materials. These are converted by the processes of the city. He says it's inevitable that the byproducts of those processes are waste. We mount large efforts to combat pollution without looking at it as a systems problem. It begins with the inputs. Alaska could pass laws if it wanted to, about what is going to cross the border of the state. He gives an example of garbage. The character of garbage has changed dramatically in the last 15 years. 15 years ago 80% of the content of garbage was organic matter so it was possible to feed it to pigs and hogs. Today less than 10% is organic matter and 80% is cellulose. The reason is that space valve called a supermarket. The supermarket has taken the raw materials that flows through the city and has packaged it. The fourth system is the enclosure system or the skin and skeleton of the city. They are playgrounds, prison walls, and are designed one at a time by one client, on one piece of property. That is not very systematic. It's the linking together of all the systems that make up the urban context which Alaska now has and which will be built in the upcoming years. The ways of making the urban context work is the technology of making urban places. We aren't stuck with the technology we have. He closes by reading a quotation that adds qualitatively to the issue. The quote is from a review on a book of poetry by Archibald MacLeish written by the historian Henry Steele Commager. He says "Rarely in history has a great nation at the heights of its power and success so wasted its intellectual and moral resources as has the United States since 1949. That waste, that betrayal is writ large in the literature of our generation. Ours is not an absurd time, it is a great and tragic time which has produced some of the most remarkable figures the world has ever seen. It is the epic where man has gone farther beyond the unknown than he has gone in the centuries

before..." [The quotation continues] "Our chief failure is a failure of the imagination. We know more than any previous generation, and probably feel less." He steps from the microphone at 55:00 into the recording.