

Chapter 5

Urbanizing: The Future

In this short book we have presented an overview of some of the most urgent issues and questions facing city dwellers, planners and scholars about the development and social significance of cities. We have examined how cities first appeared and evolved through historical time; we have considered the basic logic of cities in terms of work and livelihood, employment and production; and we have looked intently at the phenomena of housing, shelter, and residential development and their effects on urban life. Clearly, from all that has gone before, cities are extraordinarily complex and problematical places that generate a continually shifting groundwork of predicaments and opportunities. What, we might ask, are the prospects for cities in the 21st century, and what future changes are likely to come into view?

The great urban utopian schemes that were proposed in the 19th and 20th centuries may seem to be a thing of the past. Numerous individuals, from Robert Owen in early 19th century Britain to Le Corbusier in mid-20th century France, set out plans for the reform of human society by means of ambitious projects intended to sweep away the debris of previous rounds of urbanization and to rebuild cities that they thought would put humanity on a new and higher plane of existence. While this kind of social utopianism is highly unfashionable today, perhaps because of its conspicuous failure ever to deliver on its various promises, ambitious plans for the reform of 21st century cities abound.

Some of these are developmental—like the Cities Alliance ambition for “cities without slums.” In the light of what has been said in Chaps. 3 and 4 there are numerous unfinished tasks of economic development and social integration in contemporary cities, and these often vary widely depending on which parts of the world may be under consideration. It is in poorer countries, however, that these tasks are most urgently in need of attention. This is perhaps nowhere more the case than in many African countries where histories of colonial exploitation have combined with post-colonial political turmoil and often severe economic challenges to jeopardize their ability to cope with very high rates of urbanization. The developmental challenges of the urban future are significant—and have been recognized by the international agreement through the United Nations to set specific

targets for Sustainable Urban Development to promote the rights of all urban dwellers to safe, inclusive and sustainable urban futures.

Many ambitious projects about urban futures are concerned with the environment. Although we have not explored this issue in this publication, cities all over the world today play a major role in engendering and exacerbating the contemporary environmental crisis. This role is manifest in the different ways in which they are sources of atmospheric, ground, and water pollution. The rising tide of urban population growth, increasing levels of disposable income, and uncontrolled sprawl mean that these problems are unlikely to disappear in the foreseeable future. Many commentators, though, are hopeful that the dynamism and innovative nature of urban centres might generate solutions. For example, increasing density of urban living potentially mitigates the environmental impact of a growing world population. Also, many municipalities, through networks and idea sharing with cities across the world, are making strenuous efforts to introduce effective environmental regulations. While cities are deeply implicated in processes of global warming, and the ever-increasing emission of carbon gases due to intensifying urban transport, economic activity, and domestic heating, lighting, and air-conditioning demands is having dramatically deleterious effects on the atmosphere, the potential to organize cities differently, with more public transport and green buildings, holds out hope for a better urban future.

The tension in this urban environmental agenda concerns the extent to which it might be co-opted by large corporations and wealthier urban residents to advance their own interests. The concept of eco-cities, for example, and wider ideas about sustainable or green urban design, have become part of the vigorous circulation of international planning norms around the globe by large western multinational architectural and engineering firms, as well as by successful Asian companies and state development agencies. As a result, it is not clear yet to what extent eco-cities will provide opportunities for socio-technical innovation in the search for more environmentally and socially inclusive forms of urban living, or whether they will form a basis for the further displacement and exclusion of the poor through so-called eco-friendly developments.

Ambitious plans for the future of cities also involve the intricate digital and infrastructural technologies that are now emerging under the banner of the “smart city”, and which involve collecting and coordinating information, and building intelligent management systems. These technologies could also play a critical role in helping to address environmental concerns, especially given their enormous potential in regard to the coordination and delivery of public services, traffic control, and pollution monitoring. Under conditions of corporate globalization, the key question again is to what degree these technologies will be deployed in the pursuit of profit rather than meeting the demands of social equity. The question is especially urgent as much of the futuristic thinking here is bound up with the work of large corporations who spread these ideas through their marketing and sale of technology and the software they have developed. However, local political

concerns can block and slow down the implementation of even very ambitious models—the Indian Government’s goal to build 100 new smart cities to accommodate the anticipated urbanization of the next decades faces challenges not only of governance capacity, but also of locally based democratic opposition. The opportunities for digital networking amongst urban residents could support wider economic and social goals and might equally play a role in shaping future urban developments.

As the shifting character of globalization proceeds, an expanding worldwide network of major metropolitan areas or city-regions has made its decisive historical and geographical appearance. Representative examples are New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Mexico City, Dakar, Johannesburg, Mumbai, Bangkok, Beijing, and Tokyo, but these are only a few of the literally hundreds of large city-regions that now exist throughout the modern world (see Table 2.3). City-regions constitute to an ever-increasing degree the basic engines of the global economy, for they generate collectively by far the dominant share of the economic output of modern capitalism. As such, they are converging in functional terms into an integrated planetary system as they become increasingly locked into mutual relationships of collaboration, trade, and population movement. The likelihood is that these city-regions will continue to grow in size and number, especially in much of the Global South.

Thus, China’s urban population more than doubled over the period from 1990 to 2005, and is predicted to reach 1 billion soon after 2025. This has required the vast expansion of existing cities, and the emergence of new cities, such as Shenzhen, near Hong Kong. Shenzhen was a village of 10,000 in 1980 but is now one of the world’s largest cities at over 10 million and is part of a much larger sprawling area of industry-led urbanization. Cities built as part of this vast urban expansion have become models for future urban development across Asia and elsewhere. The large finance, construction and development firms which build expertise in such developments find opportunities for similar large scale construction in many other cities, from Kigali (Rwanda) to Phnom Penh (Cambodia), eager to model themselves on the Asian success stories of Singapore, Seoul and Shanghai. Even in some of the poorest cities of the world, then, plans are underway to develop large-scale new satellite cities. At the right price housing in these developments is finding purchasers amongst the middle classes who seek better living conditions. An interesting art intervention (see Fig. 5.1) from the Kinshasa-based sculptor Bodys Isek Kingelez, reminds us that modernist dreams of replacing run-down and problem-ridden cities with a new, vertical, exciting urbanism can incite interest even as they might also constitute problematical fantasies which can easily lead to serious over-reach and socially regressive public spending.

Certainly, one of the deepest challenges of some of the more ambitious concepts about urban futures concerns who benefits from them. In particular, what aspects of city life are to be organized under the rules of private property and what aspects are to be elements of a more communal form of existence? A major question concerning both the present and the future revolves around the status of the city as a place of public benefits. In capitalism, with the privileged role that it ascribes to



Fig. 5.1 Bodys Isek Kingelez: “Project for Kinshasa for the Third Millenium, 1997.” *Source* <https://en.louisiana.dk/exhibition/africa>

individual behavior, competition, and markets, the city has frequently been seen by both social scientists and ordinary citizens as essentially a site of anomie, detachment, individualism, and antagonism. This way of seeing things, however, overlooks one of the primary features of the urbanization process, namely, that it is a collective outcome that is very much greater than the sum of the parts. This state of affairs leads on to the further insight that huge swaths of urban life are dependent on what the Nobel prize winner Elinor Ostrom has called “common pool resources,” that is, assets that are held either by all or by designated groups of people. In the city, these assets take on a multitude of forms, ranging from the agglomeration economies that are one of the foundations of urban growth, through the public goods and services that are essential for the smooth operation of the city and the pursuit of urban social life, to the cultural and intellectual assets that every city accumulates in its traditions and institutions. The advantages and disadvantages of cities for social and economic life are in large degree the result of these many different resources. In other words, we must add to the Durkheimian notion of organic solidarity that is built into the intra-urban division of labor, the forms of solidarity that also come from the shared economic, social, and cultural resources that make up the urban commons. This state of affairs gives new urgency and meaning to the old refrain that we all have a right to the city.

Over the next few decades the expected growth across the planet in numbers of urban dwellers (in cities of all sizes from large city-regions to small towns) will be of the order of about 80 million people a year. The United Nations predicts that

nearly one billion new urban dwellers will be added in Africa from 2010 to 2050, and around 1.5 billion in Asia over the same time period. This continued growth will assuredly augment the range and intensity of urban problems in the future. While corporate globalization has certainly stamped its mark on cities across the world, and will no doubt continue to do so, we can also expect that residents in cities everywhere will seek to forge their own ways of living and reproducing themselves, their families and wider communities, which means, too, contesting the agendas of both global economic actors and ambitious or predatory states. In addition, urban futures will be partly shaped by the social networks which city dwellers everywhere forge, as well as by the formulation of imaginative future possibilities. The urban anthropologist Filip de Boeck writing of Kinshasa, one of the world's most informalized cities, quotes the local writer, Vincent Lombume Kalimasi, to the effect that despite all the challenges people who live there face "The city is a never-ending construction. The city can never remain a passive victim. The city is, on the contrary, a place of possibility, the place that enables you to do and to act."

All of this indicates that the most socially and politically viable kinds of urban outcomes typically reflect inclusive, collective planning and coordination, responsive to the solutions urban dwellers find for themselves, and not just arbitrary impositions by ambitious bureaucrats, or the products of profit-seeking developers. Collective action is an essential component of an urban order which meets the needs of all residents. It is essential for ensuring the availability and continuity of the public resources of the city as well as for resolving the many conflicts, breakdowns and failures that are also always an intrinsic element of urbanization processes. In the present deepening climate of neoliberalism, even currently existing collective arrangements of association, planning and coordination are politically under threat from those who consider that the market is the most effective way of preserving the urban commons and dealing with urban challenges. Even so, rebuilding capacities for collective and state action in some of the poorest cities is recognized internationally as a priority for the 21st century. We feel that the imperative of collective action in urban affairs is all the more important given the need to deal with the alarmingly deepening divide in incomes and life chances that is present in cities in all parts of the world. These remarks suggest that above and beyond the *right to the city* we must also take seriously the normative idea of *the right to make the city*.

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Further Reading

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