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Urban Futures: Some Concluding Thoughts

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The papers presented in this special issue move us back and forth, from past approaches to urban conservation to a consideration of future trajectories. As the editors note in the Introduction, the preservation of urban heritage is a rapidly evolving field, and significant developments are now being made to address the very real challenges, paradoxes and ambiguities posed by — what are invariably — spaces of significant complexity. To round off this special issue on Historic Cities, I want to point to some future trends, which, when considered together, suggest such complexities are only going to multiply. As we shall see, the future of cities in different parts of the world looks vastly different. I believe if place-specific initiatives are to be effective and appropriately tailored to local conditions, they simultaneously need to be cognisant and responsive to their larger contexts, whether that be national or global. Accordingly, it is these more macro trends that I focus on here, concentrating particularly on the regions of the world where the challenges will undoubtedly be the greatest and most pressing: the ‘developing world’, to use such a term advisedly.

At some point in 2008, for the first time in history, more than half of the world’s population were living in urban areas. Today 80 per cent of the global energy output comes from cities. They contribute around 60 per cent of the world’s green-house gas emissions and produce almost three quarters of all waste. This trend is set to continue, albeit with stark geographical differences. In Europe, North America and Latin America more than 70 per cent already reside in cities. Many cities in the developed world will continue to experience a slow, but distinct, decline in population. In stark contrast, a staggering 95 per cent of urban population growth will come from the developing world over the coming four decades. In different regions and continents, programmes of economic development and reform are being pursued by governments that are profoundly transforming the lives of tens or hundreds of millions of people and creating enormous societal upheaval. According to UN-Habitat, five million people a month are currently relocating to cities in developing countries. In Asia and Africa, the majority of the population are still rural, around 60 per cent. Long term urbanisation however, means Africa will achieve a rural-urban balance around 2050, with Asia reaching that point some years earlier.

Asia is set to continue the trend of the 1990s as one of the fastest urbanising regions in the world. Rapid economic growth meant that 111 of the 140 new large or big cities emerging after 1990 were in the region. As Thomas Campanella notes ‘China has built more housing in the last twenty five years than any nation in history’ (2008: 286). In addition to on-going rural-urban migration, 1.25 billion people will be added to Asia’s population by 2025, more than half of which will live in cities. But the region’s cities face many of the challenges confronting the rest of the developing world. Poor planning, corruption and ineffective management all mean the infrastructures of ever-expanding, extended metropolitan regions will struggle to cope with the demands placed upon them. With few exceptions, energy, water, waste, population, health, housing and highly stressed transport infrastructures will continue to be critical issues for cities, large and small. While the quality of life will undoubtedly improve for many, hundreds of millions will continue to live in sub-standard housing, without access to basic services.

China accounts for the lion’s share of Asia’s march towards urbanisation, with its cities expanding at a rate more than double the global average. Mega cities like Shanghai epitomise this trend, which grew from seven million inhabitants in 1970, to eight million in 1990, and accelerated to over sixteen million in 2010. Economic liberalisation has meant the city has doubled its population in just two decades. By 2020 it is predicted more than twenty two million people will make Shanghai their home. It is a pattern of accelerated growth repeated elsewhere, from Mexico City to Mumbai, and from Lagos to Jakarta.

Of course, such socio-economic directions are both driven by and require major infrastructure upgrades. In the case of China, for example, in 2005 the country had no high-speed rail. Just five years later it had built more kilometres of rail than there are in Europe, and if the current building programme is maintained the country will have more kilometres of high-speed track in 2015 than the entire rest of the world. And while China often grabs the headlines, other countries across Africa, South America and Asia are experiencing similar surges in infrastructure investment, powered by sustained per annum GDP growth rates of around 7-10 per cent.

Of course, this picture of socio-economic growth is not evenly shared across the developing world, with a number of countries experiencing periods of economic stagnation or slow growth, albeit for very different reasons. Nonetheless, as we look to the future there will be fewer and fewer communities that remain outside, and are thus unaffected in some form or another, by the overarching trajectories of industrial or post-industrial forms of development. It is clear the re-orientation of many national economies towards tertiary sectors is bringing culture and nature into ever more complex social relations. If we look at cities in regions like Asia, dramatic transformations, spanning a few short decades, can be seen in the way they treat their past and environmental settings. As Kong and O’Conner (2009) have indicated at length, since the late 1990s cultural and creative sector industries have become important drivers for urban regeneration and enabled cities to position themselves competitively in the global arena. In Shanghai and Beijing, the
emergence of these new ‘creative economies’ has led to the transformation of industrial buildings into art-district, heritage precincts, popularly referred to as Mogan Shan Road and District 798 respectively. Through adaptive re-use, once vacant factories and warehouses now house artist studios and galleries, along with the restaurants, cafes, shops and apartments familiar to many inner cities. But of course Beijing and Shanghai are part of a global trend, such that cities now frequently incorporate the idea of cultural quarters, or hubs into their planning process. A new interest in museums, historic waterfronts, historic properties and urban parks, which together constitute an urban heritage, has emerged via processes that place cities across the world in a ‘network’ of competition and comparison (Sassen 2002). Today Mumbai, Cape Town, Tallinn and Wellington promote their ‘unique’ heritage in an effort to attract tourists, business travellers and expatriates. Museums, in particular, have found a new lease of life by contributing to the economies and sense of place of cities.

Somewhat paradoxically though, strategies for attracting attention also involve looking the same as elsewhere. The recent proliferation of mega architecture in the name of urban place making has now expanded from sky-scraping office towers and sports stadia to include cultural sector buildings. Designed by the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art is the latest addition to a genre of architectural spectacle – as exemplified by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and Louvre Abu Dhabi – that is linking cities around the world in an international network of culture. As Kolkata demonstrates, to become a node in that network involves constructing place-less architecture, in this case a multi-leveled, interlocking cube design, that might equally be at home in London, Milan or Los Angeles. For ‘secondary cities’, such as Galle, Dubrovnik, Melaka or Pingyao, major economic transformation all too often occurs through World Heritage designation, and the arrival of large-scale tourism. These and many other examples provide evidence of how the historic built environment has come to be absorbed into development trajectories that utilize the new cultural economies of heritage.

But as we well know, in other contexts and at other moments, historic quarters continue to be seen as an obstacle to development. In both Beijing and Shanghai, the hosting of the Olympics and World Expo in 2008 and 2010 respectively involved extensive demolition. Across many developing world cities the rapidity of economic growth coupled with cheap labour and materials means the most valuable asset to be traded and re-traded is often the land itself, rather than the architecture that sits on it. The volume ‘The Disappearing “Asian” City’ (Logan 2002) represents one of the most comprehensive analyses to date of the complexities involved in promoting a conservation ethos in fast changing urban contexts. As chapters on Calcutta (Ghosh 2002), Hong Kong (Cody 2002) and Nagasaki (Hajdu 2002) illustrate, different cities have taken radically different decisions about the preservation or shedding of memories of colonialism and Western cultural imperialism. In unison, the chapters in the volume vividly demonstrate how monuments, buildings, city walls and so forth have become sites of intense political and symbolic contestation through the convergence of developmental and governance frameworks that oscillate between past and future, local and global; themes picked up by a number of the authors in this issue (see also Lu 2004, Philp & Mercer 2002).

What clearly emerges from this picture is the immense challenges that lie ahead in conserving urban cultural heritage. I have, however, pointed to real opportunities for the insertion of a heritage preservation mode of thinking into contexts of urban planning and discussions about the governance of historically significant urban spaces. As this issue has highlighted at length, understanding the socio-political complexities surrounding urban cultural heritage and its preservation will give the conservation sector a much better chance of knowing how it needs to respond, and how it might contribute and engage in the future. Although strategic or specific directions for realizing this have not been offered here, I have considered some of the wider global trends that are likely to unfold in the coming decades as a form of navigation into our urban futures.

References