http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

FEELING THE URBAN AGE

Two years. Six cities. New York, Shanghai, London, Mexico City, Johannesburg and Berlin. Together they offer a cross-section of our Urban Age in the very year that more than half of the world's population has moved to urban areas. In one generation's time, by 2050, three quarters of the planet's 8 billion people will be urban, while only a century ago 90% of humanity was living in villages and fields. Today, one million people a week move in the opposite direction – from the fields to the city. Behind the dramatic statistics lie very different visceral realities that link urban form to urban society, shaped by the homogenising impact of global flows of capital, people and energy. And each city form – compact, high-rise, low-rise, hyper-dense, sprawling, dispersed, polycentric, mono-centric, organic, geometric, informal or unplanned – brings with it its own set of social, economic and environmental consequences.

Of the six cities visited, Mexico City epitomises the tensions between spatial and social order. Its endless low-rise spread, with 60% of its 20 million inhabitants living in illegal and informal housing, conceals a fast developing landscape of difference exacerbated by the dominance of the car in a city where petrol is cheaper than mineral water. Investment into two-tier motorways, rather than into the type of sustainable public transport that has so successfully transformed Bogotá or Curitiba, are pulling the city even further apart, lengthening commuting times for its workers and pushing the poor to the far fringes of this seemingly limitless city. Here the rich seek protection in golf-course residential typologies in armed and gated communities, or the emerging vertical ghettoes of Santa Fe with their shimmering high-rises overlooking the organic but well-established shanty towns, where the vibrant informal sector constitutes 60% of the city's economy. Despite the high quality of the city's early 20th-century well-planned, compact neighbourhoods of Condesa and Roma, architects and planners are struggling to convince their civic leaders that intensification of the city's central districts is the solution to its massive infrastructure deficiencies – poor public transport, lack of water, crumbling terrain and lack of open space – while the absence of any form of growth boundary or development control outside the city's legal boundaries makes any attempt at city planning meaningless. Yet, architecture and urban design are still managing to play a significant social role. Even the controversial private sector led regeneration of the recently abandoned Centro Historico, with street improvements, pedestrianisation and city centre housing, reflects the impact the built environment can have on the image and identity of a city struggling to establish its credentials as a democratic and economically thriving city, in a period of intense political and economic change. Having perhaps reached a natural limit to its horizontal expansion, Mexico City needs to untangle its messy governance structures and recognise that parallel policies of region-wide growth containment coupled with a re-densification of its more central neighbourhoods and extensive rail-based public transport are the only way forward in responding to the city's seemingly intractable spatial problems.

The civic leaders of Johannesburg face similar but more extreme challenges in tackling the radical demise of its Downtown. Home to the city's major financial institutions up to the end of Apartheid in 1994, the central, gritty district of Hillbrow has become a no-go area to black and white residents alike in the space of a few years. At night the Downtown area is eerie, with flickering lights of makeshift kitchens in multi-storey apartments indicating the presence of a new, disenfranchised urban subclass. The effect of this transformation has been profoundly spatial. A large percentage of the city's business institutions have moved out – recently completed hotels and office blocks remain empty or boarded up in the centre – to the anodyne suburban centres of Sandton and Rosebank, surrounded by a fast expanding sea of walled shopping centres and gated residential communities – inhabited by white families and the new emerging class of 'economically empowered' blacks. Soweto and Alexandra, the formerly segregated black townships with single-storey shacks or two-storey homes laid out on a regular grid, remain physically, if not politically, segregated, with little or no public transport except for the unreliable and expensive communal taxi service which constitutes the only lifeline to jobs. In a region that will become one of the most populous in Africa – the twelfth largest in the world by 2050 despite the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and an average life expectancy of 52 – and has set itself the target of becoming a 'global city region', Johannesburg's 3 million plus population is growing at a significant pace, creating a physical landscape that celebrates difference over inclusion – behind gates, cameras and barbed wire – where public space fails to perform its democratic potential as a place of interaction and tolerance, and where a non-existent public transport system reduces the possibility of economic progress. As a new generation of civic leaders begin to tackle these complex urban questions, only twelve years after the birth of a new South Africa, Johannesburg is in a position to redirect its considerable economic power towards the construction of a more compact and integrated environment, through policies and actions that prioritise public transport and investment in the centre, retro-fit its disenfranchised communities with social spaces and facilities and contain the proliferation of out-of-town shopping malls and gated communities, preparing the ground for a new phase of development that will inevitably follow as the region continues to expand.

Like all the other cities of the Urban Age, with the exception of Berlin, New York is also growing, once again, having experienced and recovered from a period of relative conflict, crime and economic decline. Today the densest city in the USA is building on its 'melting pot' status as the only American 'majority-minority' city, where over half of the 8 million people living in the city's five boroughs are of non-white, non-Hispanic origin. Its compact urban core, with residential blocks arranged along a tight and regular urban grid and active street frontages lined by shops, has demonstrated resilience, accommodating waves of colonisation by different ethnic groups, artists and cultural entrepreneurs, and varying forms of economic activity – from garment sweatshops to corporate headquarters – underscoring the importance of built form in sustaining cycles of urban change. Despite the growth in business and services, New York's less affluent residents still suffer from an acute shortage of affordable housing, high levels of crime and poor inner city schools in one of the world's richest cities, where the average GDP per person is $40,000. The sheer density of the city and its physical distribution between the Hudson and East rivers supports what is one of the most efficient public transit systems in the world, used by over half the population to go to work (in Los Angeles it is only 20%). Despite huge investment in its transport system over the last decades – over $40 billion – the 'city' of New York suffers from a flawed system of governance where the budget of the Mass Transit Authority is determined hundreds of miles away in the state capital of Albany – rather than by the Mayor of New York – resulting in poor strategic coordination, best illustrated perhaps by the ongoing Ground Zero débacle. Together with a string of new housing projects on the edges of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queen's and the Bronx, a series of linear parks and open spaces are being developed on derelict industrial sites that have the potential of creating a 'Blue Belt' around Manhattan, providing an urban lung for its high density residents. While this large scale, private sector 'urban retro-fitting' initiative responds to overheated market demands, it risks fuelling an inevitable process of gentrification of the next generation of 'target areas' which, without the appropriate policies that determine social mix of people and uses, or public investment in facilities and open spaces, could end up with environments that lack the vibrancy and urbanity of the city's diverse neighbourhoods.

Leaving New York in a snowstorm after a four-hour taxi ride to JFK airport and taking the 373 km/h, fifteen-minute Magnetic Levitation (Maglev) train journey from Shanghai airport to the 'centre' is bracing at many levels. New York feels delicate and even fragile in contrast to the heroic scale and pace of change in China's febrile mercantile city – where over 5,000 towers with more than 8 storeys high have been built within 25 years. The raised Maglev monorail flies over a landscape of serial duplications of cookie-cutter gated communities – regimented apartment blocks neatly aligned at equal distances – with vast billboards advertising the very same real estate opportunities, and isolated reflecting glass skyscrapers that constitute Shanghai's urban experiment-in-the-making in a city of over eighteen million people. The drivers behind this hyper-scale residential development are not only the high levels of in-migration typical of so many cities of the global South, but also the overpowering demand by the city's residents, especially its emerging professional class, for more space and facilities inside their homes. Only fifteen years ago, the average space available to a single person in Shanghai was six square metres, roughly the size of small car. Today, that size has at least doubled, fuelling the housing boom that marks the skyline, and, more significantly for its negative impact on the public realm, the ground level in every corner of the city. The decision to accommodate growth by building high, with single point blocks surrounded by car ramps and empty open space, is damaging the subtle urban grain of a city of immense character and dynamic street life – so visibly threatened by the design and typology of the vast majority of new developments.

Shanghai's city planners are aware that in the pursuit of economic progress, 'mistakes' are being made that at some point in time will need to be 'corrected'. Forced relocation of inner city dwellers (to remote highrise estates), the banning of bicycles and motorcycles on selected streets (because they cause congestion), the construction of more elevated motorways (to supposedly relieve congestion), and the cynical appropriation of prime sites by corporate behemoths (especially along the Hung Po River) are indicators of an unsustainable development pattern balanced by significant public investment in the underground system with the addition of 218 kilometres (over half of New York City's entire network) in the next years. The much celebrated policy of eleven new satellite towns on the fringes of Shanghai's vast metropolitan area, each themed according to national flavours – the 'German' Town, the 'Italian' Town, the 'Scandinavian' Town, and so on – has been quietly abandoned in favour of a more pragmatic response to the needs of a rampant real estate sector – one of the many ambiguities of this independent Socialist city which has recently witnessed the effect of Beijing-directed Communist Party purges among its ruling élites.

London is also juggling with the interplay of private interests and public intervention, as it once again – like New York – faces a period of intense growth after decades of decline. While a mere 750,000 people will be added to London's current total of 7.3 million by 2015 – a modest figure in comparison to the growth rates of Shanghai or Mexico City – most new Londoners will be from outside the UK and many from the enlarged European Union attracted by 400,000 new jobs in the city's strong service and business sectors. The city's spatial configuration – a dispersed, multi-centred, green organic urban structure, unevenly distributed on both sides of the winding River Thames, which flows from the affluent west to the poorer east – has in many ways determined the shape of its future development. One of the first decisions taken by the new Mayor of London in 2001 (the Mayoral Office, itself a new institution in the history of governance of this 2,000-year-old city) was to accommodate all growth within the city's existing boundary – the so-called Green Belt. The combination of a demographic and economic growth, a strong property market and the availability of brownfield sites – ex-industrial areas, old railway goods yards, redundant gas and electricity depots – has kick-started an unprecedented process of urban retro-fitting that is transforming the image as well as the reality of living and working in London. Clusters of highrise buildings are springing up around existing and new business hubs, while the townscape of the Thames is filling up with a new generation of office and residential structures that add little to the urban quality or grain of the city, reemphasising the lasting value of London's traditional stock of terraced housing, which, like Berlin's perimeter housing or New York's mansion block, has demonstrated enormous capacity for change and adaptation as the city undergoes cycles of economic, social and cultural change. London still has one of the oldest and most expensive underground systems in the world, which is about to undergo a massive facelift through a controversial public-private finance initiative that will affect travel in London for the next decades. To protect Londoners from spiralling prices – according to UBS, London in 2006 is the world's most expensive city – there is a requirement that 50% of any new housing project must consist of affordable housing, not only for families on 'waiting lists' but for key-workers like firemen, nurses and policemen who are otherwise being progressively priced out of the market. The reality in many of London's inner city areas is still bleak, where over half of all children live in poverty (52%), and across the city 85,000 children live in temporary housing, many in 150,000 officially 'overcrowded' households. The new generation of housing typologies currently being designed for London's new communities – with a large concentration in the Thames Gateway in the ex-Docklands area – has the potential for relieving pressure on housing demand, but risks polarising the relatively diffuse distribution of wealth in London, that determines its diverse character.

Two years of urban travel and investigation have – as Saskia Sassen has put it – turned a group of urban 'nomads' into an urban 'tribe'. Together we have felt and observed how underneath the skin of at least these six world cities lie deep connections between social cohesion and built form, between sustainability and density, between public transport and social justice, between public space and tolerance, and between good governance and good cities that matter to the way urban citizens live their lives. Perhaps more than ever before, the shape of cities, how much land they occupy, how much energy they consume, how their transport infrastructure is organised and where people are housed – in remote, segregated environments behind walls or in integrated neighbourhoods close to jobs, facilities and transport – affects the environmental, economic and social sustainability of global society.

Ricky Burdett, Director, Urban Age, LSE

> **At night the Downtown area is eerie, with flickering lights of makeshift kitchens in multi-storey apartments indicating the presence of a new, disenfranchised urban subclass**

> **London is also juggling with the interplay of private interests and public intervention**

> **In one generation's time, by 2050, three quarters of the planet's 8 billion people will be urban, while only a century ago 90% of humanity was living in villages and fields**