

TIME TO THINK URBAN

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UN-HABITAT MODEL PROJECTS | 2013/14



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The City of the 21st Century values urbanization and agglomeration economies, and prioritizes integrated public transport systems, walkability, green areas and efficient use of energy. This city is generally more compact and is characterized by multifunctional use of space, where zoning is kept to the minimum.

Joan Clos, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN-Habitat © Julius Mwelu/UN-Habitat.

INTRODUCTION

Good cities do not come about by accident. The prerequisites for a good city are broad community consensus, longstanding political determination and sound urban planning which, over the course of time, engender urban environments that can provide well-being and security to their inhabitants, guarantee the supply of water, energy and food, and promote a compact and diverse urban structure in which innovation, trade and economic prosperity are encouraged and which definitively protects that urban communal space in which individual rights and opportunities are most respected. Results like these have never been achieved through spontaneous urbanization, nor by the adoption of wrong-sighted decisions.

For more than twenty years, UN-Habitat has been leading projects in urban settlements throughout the world. Our best practices have borne fruit in this catalogue of experiences which should serve as a model of urban planning and reconstruction and as a measure of the potential of cities in the decades to come. The well-made city is so difficult to achieve and so difficult to maintain that it is well worth paying close attention to these successful experiments.

The new city that UN-Habitat promotes revives, through the idea of **compactness**, the notion of “human scale”.



THE CITY OF THE 21st CENTURY



Rapid urbanization in the twenty-first century has posed huge challenges in all areas of the planet. Paradoxically, the most complex challenges are to be found in the developed world. The model of urban growth in the second half of the last century has led to a lower density in cities and a significant

increase in the formation of suburbs, with a wide range of unexpected effects. The most relevant of these could be the increased cost of living in the urban environment, which in turn generates social tensions, urban fragmentation and unrest and in certain developed countries leads to social problems in some neighbourhoods or urban areas. Demographic stagnation in the developed countries is leading to an ageing urban population, all the more evident in countries that resist immigration. There is an abundance of examples reflecting the growing difficulties impeding urban spaces from exercising their role in integrating social diversity.

Continuous increases in the cost of energy eats away at the disposable income of

“The new and reinvigorated UN-Habitat has the power to make this paradigm shift. It has the specialized knowledge, the ability to innovate and the capacity to implement programmes and projects with creative solutions.”

citizens, who are often forced to travel long distances using public and private transport. Globalization and the relocation of industries are indicators of future upheavals such as an increase in youth unemployment. In some cities this is reflected in a disturbing loss of productivity. The multiplier effect of agglomeration economies, the product of a compact urban structure which Paul Krugman links intimately to the reduction of transport costs, can, according to Brendan O’Flaherty “be lost with too much deconcentration, racial animosity, poor public health, or stupid policies”.¹

The principal strategies for combating the challenges faced today by first world cities are centred on the innovative development of alternative sectors to the manufacturing industry and bringing about a positive redensification of urban space. As Jane Jacobs has said, “bureaucratized, simplified cities ... run counter to the processes of city growth and economic development. Conformity and monotony, even when they are embellished with a froth of novelty, are not attributes of developing and economically vigorous cities”.² They are rather attributes of cities

in stagnation, she concludes. It is essential to exercise tight control over the growth of suburbs and push to raise the quality of urban life. Life in cities should be an attractive option for society, efficient in environment terms and economically prosperous. According to Brugmans and Petersen, the future of humanity is therefore inextricably bound to the future of the city, entailing a relationship between the level of the city, its environmental soundness and the residential, working and living conditions of its inhabitants. Cities, and in particular large urban expanses, create a sense of well-being, encourage innovation and creativity, and manage to do so in a relatively sustainable manner.³

In the developing world the overriding tendencies are for a rapid, often dizzying rate of growth in the urban population. Many cities grow spontaneously, without planning, and with a clear lack of capacity for the development of basic services and inadequate safeguards for public spaces, with significant impacts on traffic and connectivity. In short, there is an emerging pattern of urbanization based on low productivity, in which the informal economy and underemployment flourish, when the average age of the population is only twenty.

Every year millions of people, in a population movement that is unprecedented in the history of humankind, continue to migrate from the countryside to the city, because prosperity is to be found in urban settings: “the best predictor of income in the world today is not *what* or *whom* you know, but *where* you

work”.⁴ One third of the urban population of the world today, however, lives in slums, the majority of them in the megacities of the developing countries. Edward L. Glaeser points out that “cities are full of poor people because cities attract poor people, not because cities make people poor”.⁵ Slums are the biggest challenge of urbanization in the developing world of the twenty-first century: “population growth will be only in cities and towns, and poverty will be growing at least as fast as these cities grow. Soon, the bulk of the most vulnerable population in the world will be found in these precarious settlements. Slums in the world are the face of urban poverty in the new Millennium”.⁶

The efforts of UN-Habitat have been focused on building a brighter future for developing cities, which are most in need of support in guiding the process of urbanization. To this end we launched our catalogue of projects centred on three fundamental generators of wealth and employment: planning and urban design, urban law and urban economy.

We have likewise expanded our catalogue to include experiences in basic services, housing and urban reconstruction. The methodology used by UN-Habitat eschews existing models and theoretical concepts and focuses instead on the direct participation of the communities affected. Over a period

1 O’Flaherty, B. (2005). *City economics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

2 Jacobs, J. (1969). *The Economy of Cities*.

3 Brugmans, G., and Petersen, J. W. (eds.). (2012). *Making City*. Rotterdam: IABR.

4 World Bank. (2009). *World Development Report 2009: Reshaping Economic Geography*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

5 Peirce, N. R., Johnson, C. W., Peters, F., and Rockefeller Foundation. (2008). *Century of the City: No Time to Lose*. New York: Rockefeller Foundation.

6 United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). (2003). *Slums of the World: the Face of Urban Poverty in the New Millennium?* Nairobi: UN-Habitat.

of three decades, where institutions have shown themselves incapable of meeting the challenges, community management, guided and assisted, has emerged as the mechanism best suited to initiate reconstruction following armed conflicts or natural disasters, and also in the implementation of affordable housing projects and the provision of basic primary services: water and sanitation, drainage, the swift system, etc. Experiences in the most adverse environments, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, attest to the viability of the methodology of UN-Habitat.

Lastly, we must not forget that the urbanization process also has an essentially political component. Often it is not financial constraints that impede the needed transformation of a city, but the impossibility of finding agreement among the various stakeholders. It is in this context that the totality of the projects related to legislation, governance and soil treatment plays a key role. What counts here is helping to build

community institutions and mechanisms capable of circumventing the disagreements, misunderstandings and local conflicts that get in the way of the kind of urbanization that generates prosperity. No urban transformation is possible without consensus.

Over the next thirty years, the urban population of the world will increase by at least 2.5 billion people. Enormous financial flows will have to be mobilized for investment in construction, energy, public transport and other aspects of the urbanization process. Investment in

cities during this period will exceed the total sum of all expenditure on urbanization over the entire history of humankind. The policy decisions which will guide this enormous economic effort must take account of all the successful experiences in urban transformation in recent years. The objective is clear: to shape good cities, those in which the inhabitants live together in density and diversity, where the economies of agglomeration are able to generate prosperity and where the public spaces which guarantee equality and justice are respected and inspire respect.

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