

‘Future Fundamentals’ – [y]our future: an urbanized world

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It was not long ago the world passed the tipping point to become more urban than rural for the very first time; the exact moment is irrelevant, but the magnitude and implication of this shift should not be underestimated. Urbanization affects everyone no matter where they live on the planet. The global population swelling from three to six billion in a single generation has accompanied this transition. It is quite astounding that this continues to increase by about another 160,000 people every single day. This rampant growth with the concentration of populations in urban conurbations and the associated consumption, defines our time. If we continue on this trajectory; what will happen to our planet and its dwindling resources when it is groaning under the weight of 9 billion humans?

Cities are fundamentally the economic engines of contemporary global society. It is anticipated that by 2050 the vast majority of the world’s population in all nations will be living in urban areas. These will not just be the megacities such as Tokyo and Lagos or large mega regions such as the eastern corridor of Australia or the coastal corridors of the USA, but also in smaller unique cities of all sizes. As a matter of fact, in 2006, more than half of the world’s urban population lived in settlements of 500,000 or fewer!ⁱ So when one speaks of a city, one should not just think of the ‘top ten’, but also of the smaller second, third, fourth, etc tier cities that are found in each and every nation. Why is it that this urban migration is found on every continent?

Simply, they are places of attraction for increasing personal opportunity of all kinds; better healthcare, education, jobs, meeting new people and essentially chasing perceptions of a ‘better life.’ And yet, one-third of the world’s urban population lives in what are defined by the UN as ‘slum conditions’.ⁱⁱ Most cities today are actually incredibly inefficient and do not provide the purported opportunities for those who are moving into them. Cities house half the world’s population but consume three-quarters of the world’s resources and produce three-quarters of the world’s pollution.ⁱⁱⁱ This is fundamentally unsustainable. Our future depends upon the creation of sustainable cities since every week, for the next 30 years, the equivalent of a new 1 Million population city must be created to accommodate the doubling of the urban population in developing countries from 2 billion to 4 billion.^{iv} This is an unprecedented building programme. Unsustainable urbanization is a threat to global security.

We are faced with the dual extremes of an unprecedented growth in global population and a world that is increasingly resource constrained. Urban solutions must be more efficient because the planetary systems that support the human systems are beginning to groan with their burden. The global consumption of key raw materials is rising fast. In the 20-year period ending in 1994, the world population increased by 40%, but the consumption of cement increased by 70% and plastics by 200%.^v Between 1960 and 1995 world consumption of minerals increased by 250%, metals 210%, wood products 230% and synthetics such as plastic by 560%. This is simply astounding. Consider the magnitude of just the construction projects ahead of us over the next 40 years to meet the needs of the new urban citizens. Imagine recreating the infrastructure of North America, Australia, England, France and all of Scandinavia. This is the magnitude of the need/opportunity of the new urban citizens in China alone. Efficient, sustainable solutions are required which **OBVIATE** the word 'waste'. Waste or garbage is nothing less than a misallocated resource; a resource that we cannot afford to lose.

One fifth of the world's population live in countries where many people think nothing of spending US\$3 a day on cappuccino; another fifth of the population survive on less than a dollar a day.^{vi} It is hard to understand how these two extremes can co-exist side-by-side. It is even harder to imagine what the future will bring because the future is fiction. In fact, the future is a story that each of us participates in writing every day. It is only when tomorrow transitions to yesterday that will we have the clarity of hindsight; then, and only then, can we know what the future really was. We can postulate, guesstimate and simulate the state of our world for the coming years based on trends, analysis or perhaps even, gut feelings. However, while we cannot predict the future, it is absolutely vital that each of us consider the years to come, so that we are more prepared to prevent, anticipate and cope with that which may occur. This is even more important when we are considering the ways in which we will be, and will need to be, living in our cities.

In the spring of 2008 I attended a meeting in Chicago. Having arrived the night before from London, I found I had the early morning streets of the Windy City to myself. As the City was percolating to a slow start, I was greeting a sunny spring day by walking around the re-emergent downtown. Without the crush of morning commuters, I was able to enjoy the exemplary redevelopment of the core of this architectural Mecca; and I also noticed something slightly amiss.

Paused at a cross walk, staring up at Mies van der Rohe's tower, formerly known as the IBM Building; my skyward gaze was ripped back to the street by the labored grinding of a truck engine pulling to a stop accompanied the unmistakable scent of tire rubber in distress; notes of dissonance in an otherwise pastoral urban scene. I could not believe my eyes, when on this empty street, I saw a red and white concrete mixer sitting at the traffic light with a hissing and smoking front left tire, slowly churning away in the serenity of the morning as if nothing were wrong.

The driver opened his cab door, leaned out to peer down at the tire and retreated again. What was he thinking about? Was he checking that the tire had not yet caught on fire? Was he wondering how much further he could drive before the rubber shredded? Perhaps he was pondering how he was going to explain the whole thing to his boss or if he could make it to the construction site on time. Maybe he was wondering if his insurance would cover the whole escapade or if his coffee would get cold before he could get rid of the load in his drum. We will never know.

The traffic light turned green releasing both me and the truck driver from our paralysis. And yet, all I could do was stare at that flat tire, waiting for it to burst into flames. It resolutely refused to do so while it remained within my field of vision. I watched as the truck drove on down the street and over the canal bridge. I looked on as the peppermint-stick drum slowly descended from my view. As I strained to chart the path of that noisy engine laboring with its flat tire, on a truck I could no longer see, I realized with some perplexity that I was standing in the middle of the street in a downtown Chicago that was indeed awakening, and I promptly changed my location.

The driver was faced with some tough choices; park his rig on the side of the road in consideration of the safety of himself and others on the street and knowing that his load of fluid concrete has a limited time until it solidifies or continue on to the construction site in consideration of the productivity of the team at the construction site waiting for his load of concrete. There was not really a ‘right’ choice to make. It was a situation of considering the context and the consequences. This is the same situation that we are facing today with our cities. They, and they have become so complex that it can no longer be a question of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, but rather a rational consideration of the context and consequences of our decisions on the well-being of not just those living in cities today, but for those in the generations to come. Until recently, humans have had no choice but to live in sync with our planet in order to survive on spaceship earth. Now, with an urbanized population, we have to find a new equilibrium for our future thrival.

ⁱ World Urban Forum 3, 2006.

ⁱⁱ UN-Habitat State of the World’s Cities. 2006/7.

ⁱⁱⁱ H. Girardet, Cities People Planet, 2004.

^{iv} World Urban Forum 3, 2006.

^v UN Environmental Programme, Vital Waste Graphics. 2004.

^{vi} UNDP Human Development Report, International cooperation at a crossroads – aid, trade and security in an unequal world. 2006.
