

Development Urbanism

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Development urbanism is a multidisciplinary field focusing on sustainable urban development as a means to combat poverty and protect the environment. It is particularly relevant in developing and emergent regions undergoing processes of rapid urbanization.

Why is development urbanism relevant for you?

According to the UN, the world's population will increase by nearly two billion within the next twenty years, almost all of whom will inhabit cities in developing and emergent regions.

This will have an impact not only on their future but on yours and mine as well.

To get an idea of the speed and scale of this, think of Europe where it took about 200 years, from the beginning of the industrial revolution in the 18th century, to move about 200 million people from the countryside to the cities.

And then imagine ten times as many people moving ten times faster!

This may give an enormous boost to cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological development. And if we play it smart we can be part of that development - which will create job and market opportunities for you too!

Or we can sit back and let development pass by.

In any case, this development will also cause pollution and consumption on a never before seen scale.

Thus the future of our climate, environment, resources - and ultimately the future of humanity - will be decided in these new cities in developing and emergent regions.

And you can play a part in that. It is your future too!

Why development?

Even though it may seem scary, development is much needed in many parts of the world.

The question is what kind of development will it be? And what is the "right" kind of development?

Is it development that reduces poverty and inequality? Or improves health and human rights? Or protects the environment and the resources?

Of course we should aim for all of this.

Why urbanism?

And this is the reason why we should focus on cities!

It is in the cities, especially in the cities of developing and emergent regions, that the battle against poverty, oppression and inequality can be won. Just as it is here that the battle of the environment, climate and resources will be fought.

Because no matter what we do, people will continue to move to cities! Why?

I think there are two reasons:

1. We are attracted to other people.
2. Cities offer more opportunities.

Cities are places of co-existence, but they are also places of co-evolution!

In cities we may evolve together. Together we may create a better world. And isn't that the essence of the democratic idea?

I think it is no coincidence that our democracy has its roots in ancient Athens, which was once the urban center of the Western world. Or that the French Revolution took place in Paris and that the Arab Spring today takes place in Cairo and other major Arab cities.

Cities make us free - or at least they offer us the possibility!

And density plays an important role. According to an article in *Science*, it is population density rather than our brain capacity that has driven human social evolution. So what will be the result of living in scattered single-family houses in the suburbs? That we become more selfish?

Another important feature of the city is diversity. Density and diversity stimulates curiosity and creativity.

The concentration of different knowledge, thoughts and ideas in cities - and the exchange between cities - has resulted in numerous inventions and innovations that have greatly improved our living conditions.

But cities are not only good. They also pose many dangers, such as infections and diseases, violence in many different forms and for many different reasons, and natural disasters.

And it is always the poor who suffer the most!

It is, however, easier to provide assistance and protection to people concentrated in a small area rather than to people scattered over a large area.

Urban disasters are like aircraft accidents, which seem worse than car accidents, even though many more people die in car accidents. In fact, cities are often safer than the countryside and in many countries today life expectancy is higher and crime rates lower in urban areas than in rural areas!

Of course it takes an effort to achieve this, but it is possible because in cities we are - theoretically - able to take better care of each other.

Unfortunately, many cities don't make that effort.

Thus, millions of people migrating to cities, end up in urban slum, where living conditions are sometimes even more oppressive than what they were fleeing from in the countryside.

According to the UN almost one billion people live in urban slum today. It doesn't necessarily mean that they are extremely poor, but they are often excluded from the urban possibilities.

Slum constitute the only entrance point to cities for millions of people, but like ghettos in the developed world they are full of unfulfilled hope and untapped potential.

And the lack of individual possibilities also means wasted potential for society.

But density and diversity may also provoke change. And change is good for those who have everything to gain. It is, however, not good for those who have everything to lose. Rulers and bureaucrats will therefore often try to discourage urban migration.

But perhaps the most important argument for urban development is that urban dwellers have fewer children than rural residents.

Massive urbanization may actually be the most efficient way to stabilize population growth, which is essential for a sustainable common future.

In any case, rural areas will never be able to generate sufficient surplus to sustain current population growth in developing and emergent regions. Only cities can generate that kind of surplus.

Why a new approach?

Therefore, a new approach to development assistance is needed!

In Denmark we describe the results of the development assistance we provide as "The world's best news"!

But what are the results, really?

Huge progress has been made in Asia, with China alone having lifted several hundred million people out of extreme poverty since the beginning of the 1980s. But this is not because of foreign development assistance; it is due to the new policies introduced by Deng Xiaoping after the death of Mao - policies focusing on developing the cities.

In Africa, on the other hand, which has received much more development assistance, there is no real progress. Why? Because most of the "assistance" has been focused on developing the rural areas, effectively restraining millions of people in rural poverty, while largely neglecting the development of cities.

Rural and urban development is interrelated, and efficient agriculture is a precondition for urbanization, but history proves that urban culture, not agriculture, is the real driver of human development.

Urbanization – and with that civilization - first evolved around the rivers of Euphrates and Tigris, the Nile River, the Indus River and the Yellow River. Cities evolved in these areas because fertile land allowed for efficient agriculture that could feed large urban populations. (In addition, these locations were also favorable for trade)

Even today, urbanization without agriculture is very difficult and only possible at extreme economic and environmental costs, as you can see it in Dubai, where people, food and other supplies have to be flown in.

Nevertheless, it is also here, in the neighbor state of Abu Dhabi, that the world's supposedly first CO₂ neutral city, Masdar, is being constructed. But how can a city be CO₂ neutral, when it is located in the middle of a desert; when it is being built with materials that are shipped from all over the world; and it is being inhabited by people who will be flying in and out from all over the world together with the supplies they need for consumption?

And what will happen when they discover some more CO₂ neutral solutions and technologies tomorrow? How will they integrate them into a city where everything has already been designed and decided?

We therefore not only need a new approach to development, but also to urbanism

It would seem as if this traditional city (Shibam), located in the same region, is actually a lot more CO2 neutral. It is built of local materials; it uses natural ventilation and heat control; it is built for people who live in this area and who can sustain themselves here.

And it is adaptable to change!

But some even more CO2 neutral cities, if you can call them cities, are these termite mounds. At first glance they may look pretty simple, but when you study them more carefully you realize they are in fact highly sophisticated.

The same species of termites will create different structures in different environments while different species will create the same structure in the same environment. And they will continuously modify and restore the structure following changes in the environment, thereby maintaining a stable state of equilibrium. The interior temperature is always exactly the same!

But how is it possible, that some of the environmentally most intelligent structures are built by some of the most stupid creatures?

Is it because the collective intelligence is superior to the individual?

Each termite performs a relatively simple task, unaware of the larger complexity and without centralized control or supervision.

This kind of self-organized architecture is ecological and adaptive. And it evolves over time!

How?

This brings me to the question of how? How to create the “right” kind of urban development/development urbanism?

I think 1) we need to understand human relations in a different way. We depend on each other - both locally and globally - therefore we should collaborate more and compete less. And 2) we need to understand (and treat) cities in a different way. Not as dumb machines, but as sophisticated ecologies, in which people co-exists and co-evolve, while adapting to a constantly changing environment.

We must learn from nature!

And what is remarkable about nature is that everything is possible, yet nothing is decided in advance.

We should be creating possibilities rather than making decisions.

Because what is “quality of urban life”? I don’t think we – urban planners and managers – can or should decide that. I think we should create possibilities for people to decide that themselves.

The biologist, Brian Goodwin, has called evolution a dance. It is not going anywhere it is simply exploring a space of opportunities. That’s what I like to think we should be doing: create spaces of opportunities!

Urban spaces, that is, which are accessible and inclusive and in which matter is recycled and regenerated. And we should create those spaces together – not only architects and engineers, but everyone who has something to contribute with and everyone who is somehow affected.

Sustainable cities integrate and adapt to nature, just as they integrate and adapt to people!