

How should we plan the cities of tomorrow?

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The UN [estimates that](#) more than six billion people will live in cities by the year 2045 - compared with fewer than four billion today. But these huge numbers hide subtle complexities. Every city is growing at a different rate, in its own distinctive direction - each one is an open, complex system, which generates cultural, economic and technological innovation by combining new materials with unique histories.

Clearly, there's no single road map for the future which all cities can follow. But if urban areas are to grow sustainably, as well as coping with scarce resources, global warming, inequality, epidemics and natural disasters, then a global strategy is in order. To this end, scholars, politicians, business people and community representatives have gathered for the UN's [Habitat III](#) conference in Quito, Ecuador, to agree on the "[New Urban Agenda](#)".

Where to begin?

For those attending Habitat III, Brazil, India, China, and South Africa provide some of the best case studies of extreme division and extraordinary innovation in cities. Despite having very different histories, cities in these countries share several features, which make them useful when we want to compare how similar urban processes are playing out around the world.

Indian cities at night: [sjrankin/Flickr](#), [CC BY-NC](#)

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Brazil urbanised much earlier than most of Asia and Africa, absorbing more than 80m people into its cities between 1970 and 2000. China has recently caught up; as of 2015, 56% of its population was living in urban areas. India and South Africa are soon to follow: according to [UN data from 2014](#), almost 40% of India's population, and 71% of South Africa's, will reside in urban areas by 2030.

Cities in these countries are experiencing a period of great change. Part of this is political: South Africa held municipal elections in August this year, followed by Brazil in October, while in India – which is on a five-year municipal election cycle – elections are often held when politically convenient. In each case, different political promises can invoke a wide range of possible urban futures.

The global shift of mega-events to BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa) countries over the past decade has also caused an enormous upheaval in host cities. Examples include the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2010 South Africa World Cup, the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, the Sochi (Russia) Winter Olympics of 2014 and, of course, the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil.

These events have been catalysts for all kinds of harm and glory. While cases of Zika virus alarmed residents and visitors

in one part of Rio, the new [Bus Rapid Transport](#) system improved transport links for the growing population in another.

A Chinese nail house. [Triplefivedrew/flickr](#). CC BY-NC

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Such contrasts are common in these countries. From [slum evictions in South Africa](#), to [modernist master-planning in Brazil](#); from experiments in [participatory budgeting in more than 100 Brazilian cities](#) to “[nail houses](#)” resisting mass development in China – these countries’ cities are often labelled both “problem case studies” and “great urban innovators”.

Taking the lead

Yet while these nations’ cities are attracting fresh attention, this hasn’t necessarily given urban leaders and citizens more power to predict, understand or determine their future. In particular, municipalities continue to rely heavily on national resources to cover local expenses, while mayors are bound to follow elaborate national regulations.

As cities grow, there’s pressure for city leaders to involve local communities in decisions. While this is [ideal in theory](#), it can be unpredictable in practice. Local discussions can easily become a stage for the strongest voices or would-be politicians, or residents can retreat from such meetings entirely, to avoid confronting local economic and political powers, especially if residents live in informal houses or have irregular jobs.

Easy for some. [@/Flickr](#). CC BY-SA

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From Bangalore to Cape Town, Shanghai to Sao Paulo, it is not uncommon for residents to start such meetings by stating their inability to participate. Many consultations take place during working hours, far removed from the site of interest. Some are presented in technical terms, formally offering a channel for participation but actually encouraging silence or absence from some members, while over-empowering others.

For example, a meeting in a city hall or public building to discuss an informal settlement can discourage participants from attending if they feel they do not possess the right clothes. From stigmatisation to transportation, problems with participatory practices run deep; it takes a lot more than simply offering people a channel to voice their concerns.

Locked in?

To really understand how a city will develop, it’s crucial to understand its “lock-ins” and “path dependencies”. Lock-ins are features of the built environment, which limit the potential of a city. For example, in Mumbai, regulations to facilitate the development of luxury condos in much of the city centre has generated infrastructure such as roads and car parks which work well for car drivers, but block possibilities for imagining public and green transport systems from the ground up.

Similarly, “path dependencies” occur where the history of the urban form inhibits some kinds of change and promotes others. For instance, in Rio, the long-established divisions between the city’s formal and informal settlements limit, but also shape, any future changes to the city.

Scientific research offers the opportunity to bring a greater understanding to the constantly shifting urban form. To that end, the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council has created [a series of collaborative research projects](#), in partnership with China, Brazil and South Africa. Such research can reveal the metabolism of the city, mapping and measuring the lock-ins and path dependencies which structure the interdependent web of water, food and energy systems.

The urban web. <https://www.facebook.com/robertotaddeo28/Flickr>. CC BY-NC

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It can also analyse the way that transport systems can reproduce either segregation or integration, and how gendered divisions determine which places are safe or dangerous – and for whom. [Enormous amounts of data](#), generated by citizens’ own behaviours, can be used to interpret the city as it evolves. Of course, all of these advancements trigger ethical questions, which demand longer reflection.

While every city’s future is unique, we can enrich our understanding with collaborations that explore the diversity of cities

and draw comparisons across the world. Yet scientists face the challenging task of reconciling the long-term horizons of a city with the political motivations of urban democracy, which measure the future in electoral cycles.

Researchers have an obligation to highlight the trade offs, compromises and alternatives that ongoing elections and global UN summits might generate for each country's unique urban future. They must bring short term and long term possibilities to the surface, and mitigate between them, if we're ever to get a clear vision of the future of cities.

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