

## **POLIS POPULI**

Di Geoffrey Woodling

Putting people first often seems like the last thing urban designers consider. Cities are for the people, of the people and by the people. Throughout history, cities have been the destination for people leaving their rural homes in search of a different quality of life. It is not so different today, as 100M Chinese may attest in the coming decade, but for Latinos crossing the Rio Grande and Africans the Mediterranean, it is often from much farther away than before.

Today the world is facing the prospect of population displacement from areas rendered uninhabitable by climate change. It is evident that for those who have the determination to find a better life, cities will beckon as they always have. It is equally evident that highly urbanised nations, their destination, cannot stop such migration without resorting to barbarous means.

Cities may now be thought of as ecosystems because they are complex functioning entities, not simply built environments. As with all systems, such structures provide the framework for harnessing resources for specific purposes. In the case of cities their dependence upon distant resources often seems taken for granted, yet those are far from assured. Central to their existence and vibrancy is the dynamism of their citizens, for whom access to water, power, food and space are fundamental; but how these services are delivered, if at all, is critical to their success. That drive to build a better life is what makes cities succeed, but they also become the engine of national prosperity and the source of pollution of the very environment on which they depend. As recent events have shown, many urban services, from power to medicine, are acutely vulnerable.

When thinking about futures for cities it is vital to anticipate how the demos will shape the role and structure of cities. The obsession with imposing new design concepts far removed from the everyday experience of citizens has blighted city futures thinking. Nowhere is this arrogance more damaging than in some of the world's largest informal settlements that comprise much of the inhabited area of many giant cities. People cannot relate to infrastructure that displaces them in the name of progress, but they can nonetheless try to satisfy their often most basic needs and desires in myriad inventive ways locally.

The ability to transform the quality of life cities offer often seems beyond those in power today, because they either fail to recognise how those who follow will also demand a share of such success, or worse, try to deny them that opportunity. Moreover, it is disgraceful to hear political leaders suggest that it is necessary to deprive such future migrants of low-paid work in order to dissuade them from arriving in our cities. Such ignorance demonises migration.

In reality, immigrants are prepared to work twice as many hours and live in overcrowded space because that offers an opportunity to become settled that has always been both better than their prior life and evidence of their determination to succeed. Of course, cities must take steps to ensure that those who have the least are not exploited by the unscrupulous. That should not be done in the name of protecting the jobs of current citizens. Even some otherwise enlightened Nordic nations have done so by raising minimum pay levels at the expense of denying jobs to new arrivals. One consequence is the formation of centres of deprivation in violent ghettos housing migrant communities round larger cities.

In practice, cities differ immensely in their capacity to deal with the many challenges their citizens face in their everyday lives. How cities function is becoming the central concern, particularly as governments attempt to manage all manner of risks, from health pandemic to global warming or crime. Perhaps there is even less confidence in the adequacy of business-led solutions putting profit before operating performance. This issue plays out at local and national level as central governments deprive cities of the authority or finance to address citizens' concerns, even to the extent of undermining local public-health services.

The pandemic has exacerbated a lack of trust in authority, highlighting a widely held suspicion that government support for artificial interference with human biology in the cause of public health may be malign. This is in part fuelled by the way in which social media are perceived to be invading personal privacy when harnessed to the effort to reduce exposure to viral risk, again to preserve public health.

All this needs to be viewed against the backdrop of inexorable growth of migration that is fuelling urbanisation across the globe. It is cities that are in the front line of finding ways to accommodate migrants. Few will offer opportunities for work in traditional low-wage industries that are becoming increasingly automated. Directing the energy of mainly young and often educated migrants to new endeavours or enterprises will be critical, yet is rarely appreciated.

These two axes of concern—lack of trust in authority and new migration economy—underpin much of the uncertainty cities face. At the intersection of these axes lies maximum uncertainty. Everywhere, though, cities confront different combinations of challenges under the impact of strong external forces such as we are experiencing. Forces of change can have both a disruptive as well as an adaptive impact upon the issues cities face, witness the response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The death of many millions is a catastrophe that is unevenly endured. For some, it has had a dramatic but positive effect on public health provision, for others dreadful economic consequences as many enterprises collapse.

Cities' capacity to adapt is a function of their resilience. Some do so from bastions of apparent wealth, power and influence; others from their role as engines of the resource economy committed to large-scale material transformation; yet for both their

resilience will confront inertia or vested interests. Those still to experience the diversity of opportunities from economic development often possess the enormous human ingenuity of young populations; and like those cities yet to be established or emergent, they share access to global voice and data networks, ensuring all are aware of their potential destiny; yet, many still lack much basic infrastructure. All are immensely vulnerable to the disruptive impact of potentially catastrophic forces.

How such cities evolve will offer opportunities to reinvent themselves that can be shared across cities irrespective of their initial condition. As stock market warnings remind us, neither past experience nor radical innovation guarantees success! To anticipate where such opportunities develop, we may characterise how cities might evolve across four typical sets of circumstances.

The first of these is the Daily World of emergent cities where life is a very immediate challenge, simply because most of their citizens have yet to build their future ways earning enough to survive. Their world is almost the polar opposite of the second set, where citizens compete for advancement to capture more of the wealth they manage, in a What's Next World, the product of often high-tech innovation that has the capacity to attract and foster the best entrepreneurial minds from across the globe. Sometimes these worlds collide when large migrant communities or other culturally deprived groups erupt in protest.

Between these extremes lie cities that are in their different ways more resistant to change through either their past investment in, or commitment to, declining activities. While often characterised by older workforces, their knowhow and intent to replace ageing infrastructure encourage the development of new processes to deliver quality of life with sustainable systems and technologies.

Once such cities may have been long-established bastions of heavy mass-production industries, but such is the pace of globalisation that many others will have been built from scratch, only to secure short-lived worker opportunities, as such activities become increasingly outmoded. Industrial employment for workers is giving way to a greater concern for sustaining the wellbeing of society in new roles towards a Citizen-Centric World, the third of the four sets mentioned above.

Perhaps the most fraught cities are those yet to become the engines of growth for their burgeoning younger populations, lacking the skills, quality of governance or of infrastructure necessary to withstand the forces of disruption. Such cities are nevertheless embracing the digital opportunities that electronic communication networks allow their entrepreneurial new generations to exploit.

New markets challenge established power, such that these cities are now often the hotbed of conflict with governments of increasingly authoritarian character struggling to maintain control of the levers of power and privilege. Such cities might indeed be characterised as the Hot World, the fourth and final set.

It is readily apparent that citizens in all types of cities are beginning to express their demands with new vigour and in new ways. People increasingly relate to those who govern them in ways that hold them to account for their performance, not their ideology. Where once authorities planned services and infrastructure with little concern for the lives of those affected, they now find they must respond to demands for better services that match those in established areas. In most cases this proves to be politically, financially and organisationally problematic.

Shifting provision of services to new organisations which serve wider areas at larger scale cannot outsource responsibility and will, in effect, make those accountable even more remote from their citizens.

Such is the scale of this problem that in many cases city authorities have tried to limit the rights of new migrants to access services provided to established citizens, in effect sponsoring a kind of apartheid that reinforces the prejudice towards new migrants that most societies display. Their focus is mistaken, as many city authorities remain blind to the probability that in the coming years many national utilities will encounter increasing supply disruptions as the transition to less reliable sources of energy occurs.

Some cities, regardless of size or circumstance, now look to attempts at localism for community initiatives to deliver change. However, many such communities are too small to provide the range of services expected by their members. Mobility is a case in point, where small neighbourhoods may try to restrict access to reduce pollution or congestion but cannot do so at the cost of disrupting networks of services across the wider city. Rebalancing access to services almost defines the need for networks to operate across all areas.

The alternative of decanting people, willingly or otherwise, from one suburb to another is equally unrealistic, at least in democratically accountable societies, where moving from one suburb to another is uncommon. The inflow of new migrants is more consistently offset by an exodus of established residents to new homes beyond the city. However, the stock of existing homes is often unavailable to migrants, diminished either by rising unaffordability or shortage of supply caused by local statutes limiting subdivision of large lots to provide new housing.

Localism may offer an illusion of greater citizen wellbeing, but clearly faces enormous challenges when confronted by the scale of change needed to mitigate the threat of severe disruption. Under such circumstances perhaps cities can no longer function as distinct entities and are better thought of as functioning systems that extend to places hitherto considered rural or at best ex-urban. The distance that separates where citizens live from where they work is itself becoming more fluid. The pace at which work patterns have changed during the pandemic is testimony to the increasing speed and capacity of digital media to enable remote working for those in the workforce.

In many cities it is the non-workforce that is growing and for them the greatest challenge will be to accommodate the frail and infirm in their last years of life. Almost without exception this is beyond the capacity of local authorities to fund or deliver. The decline of family responsibility for their elderly members has still to be addressed in many societies. It may become the focus of local community initiatives where both the infrastructure and the services can be provided on some kind of shared basis that no longer divorces the elderly from other social age groups. Where once cities were recognised as the centre for the provision of many services, notably healthcare, perhaps their distribution and delivery may no longer be constrained by city boundaries.

While cities' service function may shift outward and downward, city cores are taking on the mantle of centres of the cultural economy. The desire for sharing personal experience in all forms of entertainment, hospitality and education appears to have become the dominant attractive force that acts in opposition to the wider dispersal of activity. How far people consider such experience important to their wellbeing is, for now, unclear. However, the adverse psychological impact of isolation experienced by many during the pandemic lockdown suggests that social mixing, whether at work, play or in school, is an important component of wellbeing.

The spatial distribution of cultural amenities may accompany that of residents, but it is by no means certain that smaller cities can host the diversity of entertainment which is the hallmark of many large ones. Certainly the dispersal of more wealthy residents from inner cities to smaller cities will provide a welcome boost to many local places of entertainment and perhaps digital media will allow remote virtual participation in more elaborate forms of cultural experience.

Undoubtedly such shifts will challenge the enduring distinction between urban and rural communities. Finally, the mirage of a rural economy will disappear as we begin to recognise that almost all of us belong to the urban economy, no matter where we live or work. The political consequences may potentially undermine the tribal identity of party representation.

Cities without boundaries will challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions about the organisation of city life. This will undermine the apparent functioning of local democracy, yet in time may serve to revitalise what is in many cities a marginal form of representation. Undoubtedly the notion of the city familiar to citizens of the temperate world has imposed an historical vision of cities characterised by built styles, road networks and performance, now perceived to be both obsolete and damaging and at odds with the way that newer cities might evolve.

The more innovative of cities may throw off the yoke of past constraints and develop new ways to attract the next generation of migrants. Those that try to prevent new immigration may doom themselves to gradual decline or global irrelevance. Almost without exception, cities must find a new way to exercise authority which does not stifle invention but ensures equality of access to the provision of space, water, healthy air and energy. New distributed technology systems will prove to be the catalyst for many new ways of serving citizens. To counter imposed authority a unifying force appears to be that citizens are beginning to be able to take control of how their behaviour might shape their habitat and how it is organised.

They may come to define what we have tentatively called the Wellconomy, where the wellbeing of people and planet becomes the source of wealth creation.

Those cities that succeed will become the most attractive places for future citizens.