

## >> The form of the future

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It has become almost obligatory to begin introductions to books such as this one with statistics about the rates of urbanization we are experiencing in the world today. Everyone by now knows the bottom line: we have apparently - silently in the sense that we did not mark the exact point, but with a lot of noise about the impending moment of it - passed the 50 percent mark. From this moment forward our world is unequivocally an urbanized world. And given the rates at which this process is proceeding - there are various projections about where we will be at 2010, 2025 and 2050 - it in any event seems clear that by the turn of the next century there will be no argument about the fact that we live in a world which is fundamentally different to the world we have known over the history of mankind up to now. And all this has happened in the mere twinkling of an eye in the overall time span of human history.

Making projections about urban futures is a notoriously fraught terrain, littered with the wrecks of previous attempts shown to be trite and superficial and ignorant of the evidence which is later known to have been staring the predictors in the face. Nevertheless we seem compelled to mark moments in this calamitous urban adventure with projections about where it is all leading. Not least, of course, because it is not all a roller-coaster ride with our hands off the controls. We have the power to affect the way that the story of the city goes forward, and we have to go on theorizing so that we may, to some degree at least, exercise our responsibility to steer that progress in directions which we hope will be not only equitable in terms of the way opportunities for livelihood and self-realization are distributed and mediated within this vast and encompassing urban framework, but also enabling, liberating and supportive of the human spirit. These moments of accounting come with such frequency these days that we feel we can afford some level of excessive speculation, of intellectual indulgence which is almost bound to run aground on quite obvious, yet unseen (by us), rocky shores. Because not to indulge in fairly radical speculation - if not on the exact form of the future, then at least on the underlying principle of this form and how we may be able to affect it - at this moment also seems inappropriate, given the scope and the dynamism of the changes that are upon us; given the enormity of the changes that the next twinkling of an eye seems bound to bring.

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Change occurs at many different levels, of course, some of it very substantial and obvious, some of it difficult to account for, much of it in locally specific forms which may obscure more general underlying trends. Urbanization in developing lands at this moment consists of a massive flow of people out of rural areas and towards centers, while in the industrialized lands the recent past has seen an emptying of urban centers as people with means drifted to the suburbs. These suburbs are however themselves urbanizing, and everywhere the change is to more urban forms of life, embedded in formal and informal urban economies. The changes in the qualities of modern life have much to do with technologies that have become ubiquitous in many or most parts of the world; personal and collective mobility, communications through the telephone, the Internet and the broadcast media. Quantum leaps in instantaneity - in the space-time compression that processes of globalization so depend on - have come with the telephone, with high-speed travel, and then the Internet and other more specialized technological networks. And these promise to be eclipsed in the next century as networks become ever more thickly laid over each other and ever more integrated, ultimately perhaps becoming those global 'technological skins'<sup>1</sup>, which offer, besides ubiquitous connectivity, the possibilities of instantaneous monitoring and feedback of economic, environmental and urban processes. For the first time we see the possibility - indeed the necessity - of the development of technologies less directed to overcoming and exploiting our world and its natural riches, more towards understanding and managing its processes.

But while technological probabilities and the demand for connection explode, pressures on the earth's resources seem bound to mount, as will pressures tending to social polarization and inequity. In the last 20 years, annual world production has grown from 4,000 to 23,000 billion dollars, while in the same period, the number of the world's poor has increased by 20 percent. As growing world production is coupled with falling employment, the share of the world's income available to the poorest 20 percent of the world's population has fallen, from 4 percent in 1960 to 1 percent in 1990.<sup>2</sup> The classical opposition between capital and labor of Marxian economics is replaced by an opposition between those who participate in the circuits of the primary economy (and in the growing prosperity), and those who are shut out of those circuits and have to survive on their wits and creativity in the informal sector and in temporary work. Growing social polarization emerges at all scale levels; within cities, where issues of access dominate and local networks divide territories increasingly into protected areas of privilege, and the no-go areas of the excluded; regionally, where, for example, the poor may become trapped in inner-city areas while the better-off and more mobile occupy suburban areas; between regions, which compete to position themselves within the circuits of the global economy; and at the global scale, where large sections of the world become excluded from global economic networks, while others dominate and control these circuits to their own advantage.

Multiple layerings of change, while presenting urgent problems that need to be dealt with at their own levels, are not all equally significant in terms of an understanding of the whole. Certain issues emerge out of others, and the problem of theorizing the city also becomes one of knowing, or of proposing, the nexus of change, proposing also what is product and what by-product of the processes that drive the urban machine. But implicit in how we understand the mechanics of this thing, is a choice and a judgment. Reservations about 'totalizing discourses' notwithstanding, we are still compelled, if we are to achieve some kind of crisis management towards a purpose, to understand our living environment in terms to which we can ascribe a directionality. We need to understand it in terms which we may understand as progress towards certain value-laden goals. Definitions and directions at this level are no politically neutral zone; rather, they are a matter of priorities and points of view with strong political and ethical dimensions. We will inevitably need to unwrap many of our half-conscious, half-examined presumptions about the city, and the values these notions incorporate and often conceal. There exist mental habits, presumptions of the obvious, which have themselves contributed to many of the predicaments we find ourselves in.

We need in particular to get beyond those habits which have made the city a thing to be engineered with the aim of containing and controlling social processes. Planning methods, with their strongly utopian antecedents, have often presumed a fixed spatial order underpinning an idealized social stability. They have conceived an ideal correspondence between spatial form and a regular, mechanical social process, and have imposed that form, fixing futures in an often banal or repressive caricature of the exact utopia concerned. What we need - more today than ever before, it seems - is a framework for understanding the city in terms that transcend the limitations imposed by static and utopian conceptualizations about the city and its products; the rule-of-thumb components and ensembles that have become so familiar we regard them as natural. What we need is a framework built explicitly around a principle of urban change and a framework for knowing how we can influence that change; a framework which itself explicitly incorporates an acceptance of continual process, development and change in historical time, and which can be cast in terms of continually ongoing processes of urbanization, and of social formation and transformation.

The urbanization of our world implies so much more than more buildings, more surfaces covered with asphalt, fewer green fields and woods to walk in, significant though these surface manifestations of the encroaching urban state might be. It has to do with the deep structures of our lives as individuals and as members of this ambiguous slippery thing we call 'society'. Because while we are by all accounts becoming more individualistic, less bound by bonds of family, neighborhood, community, nation and so on, we are simultaneously ever more immersed in a world which is constituted by variously media-ted relationships with other human beings, and the institutions we and they construct. Moments of real isolation from densely inter-

meshed webs of relatedness are becoming increasingly rare; our lives are more and more conditioned by the hyperconnective world in which we are immersed and an increasing density of interrelationships with people, places and institutions - and this even while our consciousness registers an increasing detachment from real social involvement and belonging. The behavior of certain species of ants becomes social by some process we are quite unable to account for, when their world is constituted by the presence of other ants. As we enter deeper and deeper into these fields of intense social interconnectivity and intersubjectivity we have no means of knowing what the outcomes of this process will be.

Society and City seem bound to become ever more inseparably bound up with each other, destined to reveal perhaps eventually in each other their essential natures. As Simmel has pointed out:

Life as such is formless, yet incessantly generates forms for itself ... although these forms arise out of the life process, because of their unique constellation, they do not share the restless rhythm of life ... They acquire fixed identities, a logic and lawfulness of their own; this new rigidity inevitably places them at a distance from the spiritual dynamic which created them and which makes them independent.<sup>3</sup>

Things, entities to which we ascribe unity and 'thingness', never comprise nothing but themselves. Their unity and autonomy hide an emergence out of processes, often of great complexity and even apparent disorder, at the level below that at which the unity is revealed. This idea is formalized by Whitehead in the notion of 'permanences' - "practically indestructible objects"<sup>4</sup> constituted out of flows, processes and relations operating within bounded fields. The mathematical study of complex systems has revealed a similar logic<sup>5</sup> and pulled the rug out from under Newton's vision of a deterministic clockwork universe. The clockwork cities of Le Corbusier and of the Garden City movement, in their pure forms at least, have all but gone the same way. We now know that things, entities, and phenomena emerge in much the same way as standing waves in a fast-flowing river; their seeming stability hiding the fact that they are generated out of dynamic relations. Processes and things are tied up together in a complex nested relationship of interdependency; things to which we ascribe stability are only provisionally 'permanent' and are liable to come under stress and to change as the conditions and forces and flows that generated and support them change. And we live in the midst of change, much of it surprising and unaccountable at first sight, all of it probably eventually to reveal its logics of emergence long after the critical moments of transformation. Our anxieties in the face of the changes taking place around us reveal how difficult this process is to absorb. Our sense of belonging has much to do with living in a world which we feel we can understand - and in which we feel understood by others.<sup>6</sup> In a world where what appears solid and certain to the youth of one generation has a tendency to dissolve into thin air before that generation reaches middle age, such a sense of being familiar

with the world is going to be a rare state indeed, and we will surely have to learn to deal in our urban future with the condition of provisionality as being routine. Explicitly recognizing this need for a mental and cultural acceptance of provisionality as a normal state of existence may be one of the most difficult but necessary tasks for building a future which does not feed on a fear which leads to insularity and to social and territorial segmentation and polarization.

In fact, many of the strategies we have devised and use in making the city, have as their underlying motive the avoidance or control of this intrinsic logic of formation and transformation. As Jane Jacobs has so powerfully argued, the neighborhood and the urban center of the planning manuals, are often areas which seek distance from the edgy and uncontrollable - from the contaminating power of the city itself. In the massive building boom of the last century, these forms achieved a status of normality and are often better known to newer generations of urban dwellers than are Jacobs' streets and sidewalks of former times. They have achieved their highest forms in the modern interiorized shopping environment - to be found now equally in center and periphery as a sort of generic plug-in element - and in the separated suburban or even gated 'community'.

But these forms, in their determination to define a safe and predictable inside, just as emphatically define an outside; a space beyond the consideration of highly localized spatial and social designs, and a space which has become the other defining environment of the contemporary city as we have made it. The "incongruous rims of ratty tattoo parlors and second-hand stores"<sup>7</sup> of the edge of center, and the strange, deserted, unnamable spaces of the periphery, are just as much a product of a now generic way of making the city as are its more conscious products. And paradoxically - or maybe not, given the forthright anti-urbanism of many of the twentieth century's planning utopias - these days, it is often these spaces which shout to us about the potentials of the urban, of an environment which is open to shifting valences, to expedient and practical appropriation, and to an unprogrammed and unpredictable vitality. It is these spaces that are occupying the attention of some of the most original minds in urban research and design<sup>8</sup> and it is these spaces that often seem to hold out the promise of a future open to surprising new potentials, and to the way human need can be served through empowering human creativity and resourcefulness. These spaces, beyond the constraining limits of institutionalized consumption and cast-in-concrete social patterns, may offer some individuals and groups the opportunities they seek. Again it was Jacobs who pointed out to us that "there is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness and disorder ... the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served."<sup>9</sup> As protected, programmed, imaged and designed urban spaces are opposed to those left-over spaces, which by the fact of their being unprogrammed represent potentials for creative appropriation, so the regimentation of programmed lives within a rapidly globalizing order of corporate eco-

nomics and consumption is opposed by the restless spirit of masses of individuals, within marginal territories at all scale levels (from that of the suburb or slum to that of the third world), struggling either to survive by necessity outside this (for them) excluding order, or simply to be creative and to realize themselves.

It is tempting to take from all this, besides the fact that cities can be in and of themselves divisive, and that it can be us and our ways of building that can make them divisive, a rather naive conclusion that the processes of the city themselves, if allowed their own freedom of expression and working, offer the best bet we have for human opportunity and self-realization. This is a thesis that has been taken up in diverse forms on both sides of the political spectrum in the past by those who have reacted against the utopian fixity of modernist planning. The 'invisible hand' is a notion with which we are all too familiar, and we need to be wary of straightforwardly recycling conceptual habits about transformation dynamics, and projecting these wholesale onto the city. Wherever we start in thinking about urban process we will almost surely, if we are honest and diligent, be confronted with heterogeneity, not just in the products of the processes but also in the nature of the processes themselves. Within the nested interdependency of processes and things we talked about earlier, particular configurations of processes and things will actively reproduce these configurations to serve their own interests. The urban world is as much an ecology of competing power interests capable of manipulating the field in a top-down fashion, as it is an ecology of synergetic agents who evolve structures from the bottom up. The division of channels of social and economic process and flow into so-called 'trees' and 'semi-lattices' (if one is listening to Chris Alexander<sup>10</sup>), or 'hierarchies' and 'meshworks' (if one is listening to Manuel de Landa<sup>11</sup>), or 'trees' and 'rhizomes' and 'striated' and 'smooth' space (if one is listening to Deleuze and Guattari<sup>12</sup>) - especially if we recognize that network systems can operate in different modes at different scale levels, as well as at different levels of integration and interaction across scale levels - could offer a means of understanding how we may influence and direct processes of urbanization and social formation towards ends which are in the end liberating and enabling. It is well known that networks have fundamentally different ways of distributing control, depending on their tree-likeness or semi-lattice-likeness. But here again a word of warning is called for; meshworks/semi-lattices exist in the real world always in combination with, and in hybrid forms with, hierarchies/trees, and their properties, even in their pure form, are almost impossible to determine by theory alone. The fact is that we need both forms if we are to achieve the ends of both liberation and intelligibility. As Deleuze and Guattari assert; "rhizomes also have their own, even more despotic, hierarchy ... there are despotic formations of immanence and channelization specific to rhizomes, just as there are anarchic deformations in the transcendent system of trees"<sup>13</sup>. De Landa warns that "meshworks grow by drift and they may drift to places we do not want to go. The goal-directedness of hierarchies is the kind of property that we may desire to keep at least for certain institutions."<sup>14</sup>

We are making a transition from a world where the urban represents a condition of social life, to one where it represents *the* condition of social life. The urban was once an interval of concentration in a life space-time which included the countryside and the home. Both these non-urban conditions have been progressively infiltrated, to the point where, for some of us at least, almost all the activities and functions we used to think of as being urban can be, and are being, performed everywhere. We shop and work at home, at our computer screens or on the telephone. We drive to out-of-town business parks and malls and haul files and laptops, or shopping bags, back to our cars, parked on spots where cows recently grazed. But at the same time as the urban is becoming the condition of modern life, the properties of urban places are assuming all manner of hybrid and newly-emergent forms. The obvious variety and differences both between and within cities in the manner of emergence of the local condition, needs for a moment to be considered against the incongruous nature of the local under the process of globalization. The apparent disappearance of a strong local place condition in many situations can be contrasted with the fact of a simultaneous emergence of places whose power is precisely a consequence of their alignments within global networks.<sup>15</sup> As far as designers and planners are concerned today, the lesson may be one of understanding the problem in terms of a less superficial, less pictorial, perhaps less object-oriented and certainly more process-oriented, understanding of the condition of the urban and of urban place. While the effect of the global on the local may suggest another way of understanding the emergence of local conditions, the local and the global are not the only scales in the modern city, and are certainly not the only scales which bear on particular urban conditions.

There is hardly a place - certainly no urban place - in our world which is not touched by the global, but the influence of this and other scales depends very much on the particular conduits of their transmission. While these conduits, in our contemporary world, need not all be physical networks, one of our particular tasks is to understand the mechanics of the city in terms of urban scale relationships and the networks which mediate them. As Bruno Latour reminds us, the lengthening of our technological networks has had enormous scaling effects, enabling interrelationships between the local and the global and all scales in between. We should not however make the mistake of thinking of the local and the global in terms of the old opposite categories of universal and contingent. We can follow the pathways of all networks, whatever their scale, in the local; all networks are fabricated, used, guarded, adjusted, controlled and maintained in the local, and to the service of particular interests which find their place in the local, and while there are today "... continuous paths that lead from the local to the global, from the circumstantial to the universal, from the contingent to the necessary ...", these paths remain, and remain continuous "... only so long as the branch lines are paid for."<sup>16</sup> When considered in this way, it's not difficult to see that many interesting questions of the contemporary city, as far as they concern us, revolve not so much around issues of local adjacency supplemented by the transmission of a gen-

eralized global onto every local surface, but rather around the diagonal paths interrelationships take through nested scale levels. The pathways producing the local condition, are woven through an urban-social space which spans, and is modified by, networks operating within and between adjacent and not so adjacent urban scales. It is no longer sufficient to think of locality as being a simple given, defined by its coordinates in Cartesian space - nor is it sufficient to think of the scale issue as one of the simple penetration of a generic global into all lives and all places. Rather the local needs to be seen as a production of the real social and economic interconnections that people and their transactions trace through the physical and virtual network spaces of the city at a variety of speeds and scales, up to and including that of the global.

Such a perspective, if taken seriously, is bound, we feel, to take us beyond the conventional planners' and designers' wisdoms of 'community', 'neighborhood', 'urban village' and so forth, which see the local as a refuge, as the psychological home of the disaffected modern urbanite, to be made as a sort of protective buffer or fortress against the contaminating and disturbing influence of the city. An approach which seeks to support processes which empower people - and especially those people whose power is limited within existing social and economic orders - is almost bound, we feel, to find value in those spatial processes which tend to 'globalize' (or at least 'de-localize'); which tend to offer opportunity and power to people with respect to a wider world around them. People need to participate in the dynamics of change, and they need to participate through places (both virtual and 'physical', though we feel the importance of face-to-face social relations should not be underestimated) situated within and energized by a non-local space which is open, connected to streams of urban, regional and global power while not being controlled by them. If this begins to sound like the space of the city promoted by Jacobs, then what we seek are ways to uphold the virtues of Jacobs' open, connective, socially thick and layered, traditional city within a rather different sort of urban state. We can do this only by understanding the ways in which the processes of people's lives and livelihoods today connect the local to the global and to all the scales in between.

All this involves processes and mechanics which are difficult to predict, and difficult to theorize using current ideas about the city. They may be by their nature processes which depend for their outcome on finely-adjusted thresholds so that we are left with the familiar dilemma of having to try things out before knowing if or how they work. Simulation of urban processes within virtual environments as well as the monitoring of processes in the real world are two obvious ways forward. What we also need to do, though, is consider and reconsider our ways of looking at and thinking about urbanization and urban and social formation processes and the networks they exploit, as well as our understanding of their abstract categories, so that we can begin to develop a deeper insight into the way all of this works - and of how power relations are embedded in ideas of urban stasis and change, and how they are distributed within the urban social and economic field.

This is a subject for a research program to which we can at this point give only indications. The city is an environment, an ecology rather than a neutral setting for social practices; it is itself a part of the 'habitus', the "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" producing practices which reproduce the generative principle.<sup>17</sup> We need to know more about the ways in which different urban spaces influence the "conductorless orchestration which gives regularity, unity, and systematicity" to practices.<sup>18</sup> And we need to understand how this can be influenced to happen in a way which imparts form and pattern, with opportunity, without coercion, and holding futures open for continuous change and development. As people who attempt to build living environments which empower people, we need to build an understanding of the ways people's surroundings are integral with their lives and how these surroundings may liberate and enable people to search for and find their own realization in a continuing cycle of creative adaptation. Research to this end is hardly begun, but the blind spots and neglected domains in our discipline seem, to us at least, to be clustered around this general zone. We believe that the stories of our cities from this point forward will be marked more and more by the way they deal with and make provision for the factor of change. Research needs to focus not just on the procedures of city building but also on the conceptual apparatus that we bring to bear on the problem, and we will need to measure this apparatus not only against values of justice and equity, but also against sets of values that incorporate an idea of an urban future which makes "provision for the fact of history".<sup>19</sup> We do not claim to have answers at this stage, and propose here only to pose questions around the general theme of transformation as a permanent urban state.

The cities collected here look at processes of change from the perspectives both of the author and of the particular conditions of that city. We make no claims to comprehensiveness; indeed we hope to follow these stories at regular intervals with new stories about new cities. What we hope they do is illustrate some of the spectrum of urban development and change at this point in history, as well as surveying some of the conceptualizations by which these processes of change are understood.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As proposed by Derrick de Kerckhove, for example in his paper 'Architecture and Plasma' in *Archis* 5, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> *Reference will follow shortly!*
- <sup>3</sup> G. Simmel, 'The conflict in modern culture', in K.P. Etkorn (ed. and trans.) *Georg Simmel: The conflict in modern culture and other essays*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1968, pp. 11-12.
- <sup>4</sup> A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, Lowell Lectures, Cambridge 1926.
- <sup>5</sup> J. Cohen & I. Stewart, *The Collapse of Chaos: Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World*, London: Viking/Penguin, 1994.
- <sup>6</sup> See M. Ignatieff, 'There's no place like home: The politics of belonging', in S. Dunant and R. Porter, *The Age of Anxiety*, London: Virago, 1996.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, p. 35.
- <sup>8</sup> For example, S. Boeri, 'Notes for a research program', in arc en rêve centre d'architecture et al. *Mutations*, Barcelona: arc en rêve centre d'architecture & ACTAR, 2000.
- <sup>9</sup> J. Jacobs, op. cit., p. 25.
- <sup>10</sup> See C. Alexander, 'A city is not a tree', in G. Bell and J. Tyrwhitt, *Human Identity in the Urban Environment*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972.
- <sup>11</sup> See M. De Landa, 'Meshworks, Hierarchies and Interfaces', online. Available <<http://www.t0.or.at/delanda/meshwork.htm>>.
- <sup>12</sup> See G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>14</sup> De Landa, op. cit.
- <sup>15</sup> S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- <sup>16</sup> B. Latour, *We have never been Modern*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 117.
- <sup>17</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 78.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- <sup>19</sup> R. Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder*, New York: Norton, 1992, p. 99.