

# The Endless City

How are our global cities changing in a rapidly urbanising world? Four years into a major investigation, **Ricky Burdett** looks at the lessons that are emerging for future planners and policy makers.

‘New York feels delicate and even fragile in contrast to the heroic scale and pace of change in the febrile mercantile city of Shanghai’

Of the nearly 18 million people living in Mumbai's Metropolitan Region, the literacy rate of the total population is 87 per cent compared to a national average of 65 per cent. For all cities in developing worlds, adult literacy rates are significantly higher than their national context

Beneath the skin of the world's cities lie deep connections between social cohesion and built form, between public transport and social justice, between public space and tolerance, and between governance and the way urban citizens live their lives. More than ever before, the shape of cities – how much land they occupy, how much energy they consume, how their transport infrastructure is organised and where people are housed – in remote, segregated environments behind walls or in integrated neighbourhoods close to jobs, facilities and transport – defines the environmental, economic and social sustainability of global society. Even under the uncertainties of the current economic climate, cities will continue to be places where the tensions and potential of society are concentrated well into the 21st century.

These are the questions addressed by LSE's Urban Age project, jointly organised with the Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society. Since 2005 the Urban Age has been documenting how cities are changing in the context of a rapidly urbanising world where over 50 per cent of the global population now live in cities – 100 years ago it was only ten per cent and by 2050 the number

of urban dwellers on the planet could reach 75 per cent. *The Endless City*, recently published by Phaidon, illustrates the findings of the first phase of this interdisciplinary investigation in six major urban centres – Johannesburg, London, New York, Mexico City, Shanghai and Berlin. The second ongoing phase is focusing on Mumbai, São Paulo, Istanbul and other growing cities of Asia, South America and the wider Mediterranean region.

Together with the extremes of São Paulo, Mexico City perhaps best exemplifies the tensions between spatial and social order of the Urban Age cities. Its endless low-rise spread, with 60 per cent of its 20 million inhabitants living in illegal and informal housing, conceals a fast developing landscape of difference exacerbated by the dominance of the car in a city where petrol is cheap. Investment into two-tier motorways, rather than the type of sustainable public transport that has so successfully transformed Bogotá or Curitiba, is pulling the city even further apart, lengthening commuting times for its workers and pushing the poor to the far fringes of this seemingly limitless city. Here the rich seek protection in golf-course residential typologies in armed and gated communities, or in the emerging vertical ghettos of Santa Fe with their shimmering high-rises overlooking the organic but well established shanty towns – towns where the vibrant informal sector constitutes 60 per cent of the city's economy.

The civic leaders of Johannesburg face similar but more extreme challenges in tackling growth and change. In a region that will become one of the most highly populated in Africa – the twelfth most populous in the world by 2050 despite the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and an average life expectancy of 52 – Johannesburg has set itself the target of becoming a ‘global city region’. Home to the city's major financial institutions until the end of apartheid in 1994, the central, gritty district of Hillbrow has become in part a no-go area in the space of a few years. At night the downtown area is eerie, with the flickering lights of makeshift kitchens in multi-storey apartments indicating the presence of a new, disenfranchised urban subclass – which includes many immigrants from neighbouring countries. The effect of this transformation has been profoundly spatial. A large percentage of the city's business

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Residents of the Paraisópolis favela sit cheek-by-jowl to the wealthier high-rise gated complexes of Morumbi in São Paulo. At the beginning of the 21st century, 37 per cent of the population in Brazil live in favelas

institutions have moved out to anodyne suburban centres of Sandton and Rosebank, surrounded by a fast expanding sea of walled shopping centres and gated residential communities – inhabited by white families and the new emerging class of economically empowered blacks. Soweto and Alexandra, the formerly segregated black townships remain physically if not politically segregated, with little or no public transport except for the unreliable and expensive communal taxi service which constitutes the only lifeline to jobs.

New York is also growing, once again, having experienced and recovered from a period of relative conflict, crime and economic decline in the 1990s. Today the densest city in the USA is building on its ‘melting-pot’ status as the only American ‘majority-minority’ city, where over half of the eight million people living in the city's five boroughs are of non-white, non-Hispanic origin. Its compact urban core, with residential blocks arranged along a tight and regular urban grid and active street frontages lined by shops, has demonstrated resilience, accommodating waves of colonisation by different ethnic groups, artists and cultural entrepreneurs, and varying forms of economic activity – from garment sweatshops to corporate headquarters – underscoring the importance of built form in sustaining cycles of urban change. The sheer density of the city and its physical distribution between the Hudson and East rivers support what is one of the most efficient public transit

systems in the world, used by over half the population to go to work (in Los Angeles public commuter transport is used by only 20 per cent).

New York feels delicate and even fragile in contrast to the heroic scale and pace of change in the febrile mercantile city of Shanghai – where over 5,000 towers of more than eight storeys have been built within 25 years. As one travels on the 373 km/h, 15 minute Magnetic Levitation (Maglev) train journey from Shanghai airport to the ‘centre’, the monorail flies over a landscape of serial duplications of cookie-cutter gated communities – regimented apartment blocks neatly aligned at equal distances – of vast billboards advertising the very same real estate opportunities, and of isolated reflecting glass skyscrapers that constitute Shanghai's urban experiment-in-the-making in a city of over 18 million people. The drivers behind this hyper-scale residential development are not only the high levels of in-migration, typical of so many cities of the global south, but also the overpowering demand by the city's residents, especially its emerging professional class, for more space and facilities inside their homes. Only 15 years ago, the average living space available to a single person in Shanghai was six square metres, roughly the size of a small car. Today, that space has at least doubled, fuelling the housing boom that marks the skyline, and, more significantly for its negative impact on the public realm, the ground level in every corner of the city. Shanghai's city planners are aware that in the

pursuit of economic progress, ‘mistakes’ are being made that at some point in the future will need to be ‘corrected’.

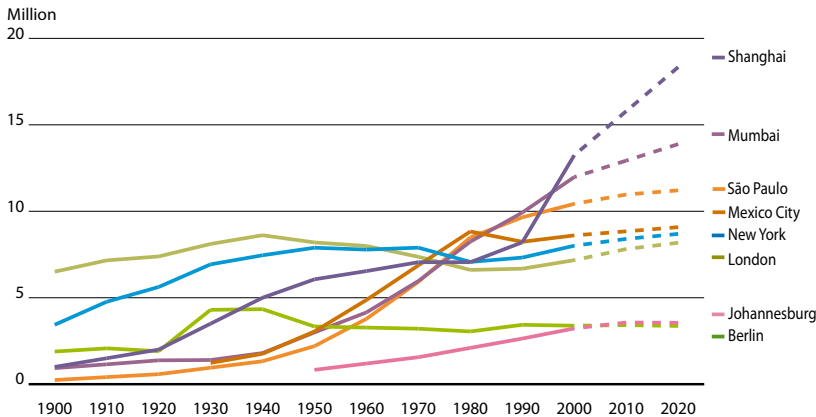
London is also juggling with the interplay of private interests and public intervention, as it once again – like New York – faces a period of population growth after decades of decline. While a mere 750,000 people will be added to London's current total of 7.3 million by 2015, a modest figure in comparison to the growth rates of Shanghai or Mexico City, most new Londoners will be from outside the UK and many from the enlarged European Union attracted by 400,000 new jobs and the need for over 30,000 new homes a year (as projected by the Greater London Authority's London Plan). One of the key policies of the London Plan is to accommodate all growth within the city's existing boundary – the so-called Green Belt. The combination of projected demographic and economic growth and the availability of brownfield sites – ex-industrial areas, old railway goods yards, redundant gas and electricity depots – has kick-started a process of urban retrofitting that is transforming the image as well as the reality of living and working in London. While the current economic downturn may affect the pace and scale of growth, the pattern of urban development is likely to remain the same.

‘Poor but sexy!’ is how Berlin's Mayor Klaus Wowereit charmingly defended his city at the Urban Age Summit in the German capital. For



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## Population growth in the Urban Age cities



Berliners, this statement struck a chord amongst the city's residents just as the national government refused to take on the full responsibility for the capital's state of near bankruptcy in 2006. For the outsider, the concept of Berlin as 'poor' is difficult to reconcile with the pervasive lustre of newness that defines the reborn centre on both sides of the former Wall. The misleading predictions of a steep population increase after re-unification, when the city instead experienced a minor population loss and a high population 'churn' – over a third of Berliners have moved out and been replaced in the last ten years – reflect the reality of a city with few jobs, high unemployment and low wages. Today, there is only a handful of global headquarters of corporate firms compared to Frankfurt, New York or London. Yet, the city has demonstrated a resilience in the face of such economic gloom, based to a degree on the spatial quality of its distinctive urban form, composed of perimeter blocks with generous courtyards and tree-lined avenues.

So what lessons are emerging from Urban Age's investigation into the future of cities? In its own way, each city responds to generic challenges and opportunities of globalisation, immigration, jobs, social exclusion and sustainability. Immigration is, in many ways, the lifeblood of Shanghai, Mexico City and Johannesburg, but the spatial distribution of new arrivals in remote locations starved of the most basic facilities and infrastructure (schools, sewers and transport) creates environments that fail to build on the potential of cities to promote cohesion – as described by Richard Sennett, to be places where 'urban life becomes a source of mutual strength rather than a source of mutual estrangement and bitterness'.

Older cities have accumulated difference over time, developing resilient urban structures that accommodate social difference both within their overall dense but distributed urban structures and in the design of the building blocks of urban form – the housing typology. The Berlin perimeter block,

the London terraced house and the New York grid with its mixed use, multi-storey buildings and active ground floor uses, have successfully adapted to cycles of social and economic change without setting in stone the temporary or sudden shifts in economic and political life affecting Shanghai, Mumbai, Mexico City, Johannesburg and other world centres – a condition brought into even sharper focus by the current global economic crisis. The next generation of city leaders will need to reverse the trend of increasing fragmentation and discontinuity in favour of more integrated urban structures that build on the local DNA of each city's form.

At the metropolitan and regional scale, more compact urban development provides the only sustainable answer to global urban growth. Less sprawl leads to a reduction in energy use and pollution – cities contribute 75 per cent of world CO<sub>2</sub> emissions – and dense cities require less investment in public transport, infrastructure and services. The retrofitting of New York's and London's ageing public transport system, investment in extensive underground networks in Shanghai and São Paulo, and the success of Mexico City's Metrobús and Bogotá's less onerous TransMilenio bus and cycle network, show how city governments prioritise public transport not simply as an end in itself but as a form of social justice providing millions of people with access to jobs and amenities.

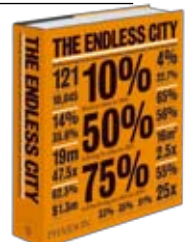
But the success of these interventions, in many ways the emerging Urban Age agenda – advocating the compact, mixed use, well connected, complex and democratic city – runs contrary to what is happening on the ground in the vast majority of urban areas. Today's cities are larger than anything we have seen before. They are growing at a faster pace, but the shape and the language of the emerging urban landscapes are somewhat familiar. They are, in effect, by-products of outdated western planning models predicated on separation rather than inclusion, creating single-function zones, elevated motorways and gated communities. We seem to have dumped these models onto the fragile urban conditions of exploding cities in the global south. By continuing the work of Jane Jacobs, one of the greatest urbanists of the 20th century, who believed that 'the look of things and the way they work are inextricably bound together', the Urban Age is hoping to help rectify this imbalance. ■



### Ricky Burdett

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For more information on Urban Age see [www.urban-age.net](http://www.urban-age.net)



Urban Age's research focuses on quality of life in urban areas. Implementation of the new promenade for the Waterfronts Development Centre in Mumbai, one of the winners of the Deutsche Bank Urban Age Award, resulted from a shared vision and collective action on behalf of several community organisations and local government



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