
Urban crisis: Culture and the sustainability of cities

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1

Introduction

M. Nadarajah and Ann Tomoko Yamamoto

Our world is becoming more urbanized, and as the World Summit on Sustainable Development underscored, we must make sure that this urbanization is sustainable. Indeed, the success of our collective efforts for economic growth, social justice, biodiversity and climate protection depends in large measure on how well we protect and manage our urban environments.¹

This volume is an enquiry into the nature of urbanization in general and Asian urbanization in particular, not so much to philosophize as to align its course in the direction set by the global agenda of sustainable development, as articulated by the United Nations and observed by Kofi Annan above. It is an effort to make deeper sense of the growing urban crisis in Asia and to address it comprehensively. The effort is animated by the complex vision of a sustainable city, which compellingly proposes a future in which the urban problems confronting us today can be effectively overcome. It is the aim here to explore this complex vision from the perspective of (local) culture, transcending both the economic and environmental viewpoints that dominate popular constructs of sustainability. This volume seeks to build a plausible “narrative order” which captures conceptual schemes, case studies, community participation, and cultural indicators that contribute to and shape a cultural theory of the sustainable city, moving beyond purely techno-economic (or techno-scientific), market-driven urbanization strategies based on Euclidian planning and top-down decision-making.

Table 1.1 Mega-cities and population, in millions

1950		2000		2015	
1. New York, USA	12.3	1. Tokyo, Japan	26.4	1. Tokyo, Japan	26.4
2. London, England	8.7	2. Mexico City, Mexico	18.4	2. Bombay, India	26.1
3. Tokyo, Japan	6.9	3. Bombay, India	18.0	3. Lagos, Nigeria	23.2
4. Paris, France	5.4	4. São Paulo, Brazil	17.8	4. Dhaka, Bangladesh	21.1
5. Moscow, Russia	5.4	5. New York, USA	16.6	5. São Paulo, Brazil	20.4
6. Shanghai, China	5.3	6. Lagos, Nigeria	13.4	6. Karachi, Pakistan	19.2
7. Essen, Germany	5.3	7. Los Angeles, USA	13.1	7. Mexico City, Mexico	19.2
8. Buenos Aires, Argentina	5.0	8. Calcutta, India	12.9	8. New York, USA	17.4
9. Chicago, USA	4.9	9. Shanghai, China	12.9	9. Jakarta, Indonesia	17.3
10. Calcutta, India	4.4	10. Buenos Aires, Argentina	12.6	10. Calcutta, India	17.3

Source: Population Reference Bureau, 2005

Urbanizing Asia

The World Bank predicts that over “the next three decades the urban population of developing countries will grow (from natural increase, migration, and reclassification of rural areas) by 60 million people a year”.² This transformation is fuelled by urban growth in the Asia-Pacific region, which included only eight cities of more than 5 million inhabitants in 1970; today there are more than 30. In 1990 the population of Asia’s cities totalled 1 billion; by 2020 the urban population of Asia will have more than doubled to nearly 2.5 billion, about half of the total population. More than half the urban areas of the planet will by then be located in Asia, and they will hold more than a third of the world’s population.³

A large number of these urban areas will become mega-cities – a city with more than 10 million inhabitants. Mega-cities within Asia include Tokyo, Osaka, Seoul, Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Jakarta, Calcutta, and Bombay (Table 1.1⁴), and projections predict their ranks will be joined by Lahore, New Delhi, Karachi, Dhaka, Manila, Bangkok, and Hyderabad by 2015.⁵ It is clear that the twenty-first century is witnessing the birth of an urban Asia that is more complete and comprehensive (Figure 1.1⁶).

Though similar in many respects to urbanization in general, there are some distinctive features that mark urbanizing Asia.

- *Immense urban growth.* The sheer size of urban populations forces governments to cope with tremendous growth in a very short period of

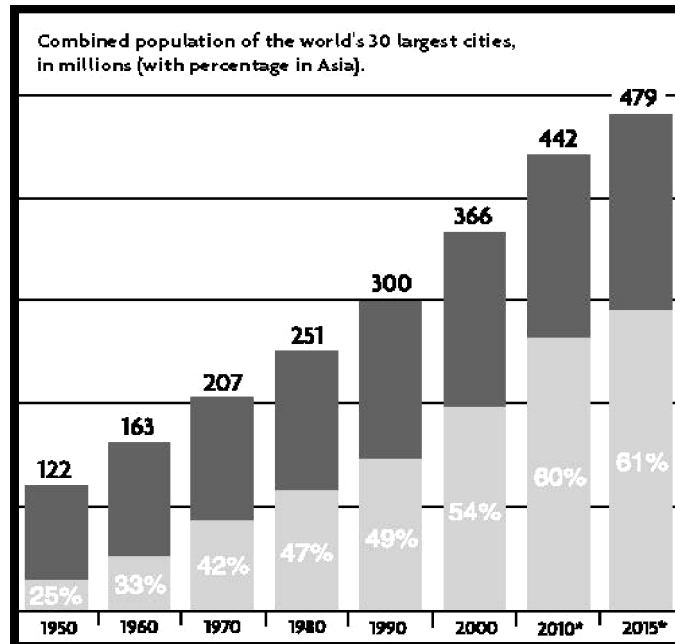


Figure 1.1 Populations of world's 30 largest cities, in millions and with percentage in Asia (Source: UNESCO, 2002)

time. The urban populations of both China and India, for example, will grow by more than 340 million by 2030, creating tremendous challenges in the provision of infrastructure, environmental management, and employment. Even a small country such as Laos (5.3 million inhabitants in 2000), one of the poorest countries in the world, will add 3.2 million to its urban population while moving to a level of only 43 per cent urbanization in 2030. This will account for more than 60 per cent of the country's total population growth in that period. Given its very low national income and the continuing high proportion of people in rural areas, it will be very difficult to give strategic priority to urban development, even in the capital city of Vientiane.

- *The prominence of mega-cities.* By 2015, 16 of the world's 24 mega-cities (cities with more than 10 million people) will be located in Asia. While most urban residents in both Asia and elsewhere will continue to live in smaller towns and cities, the urban hierarchy of Asia will be dominated by the emergence of these larger cities. Urban development will often stretch in corridors between the main city core and secondary cities, much like the megalopolises of the eastern USA.

- *Uneven globalization.* For the past two decades Asia has surpassed the rest of the less-developed world in terms of integration into the global economy, creating greater opportunities for urban development. This development has proceeded unevenly, however, and a two-tier urban system is likely to emerge in Asia as a result. Some urban areas will be increasingly integrated into the global economy and become more international in character. These cities – such as Seoul, Singapore, Taipei, and Shanghai – will have to manage the challenges and opportunities that come with rapid economic growth and change. On the other hand, there will also be cities with more domestically oriented economies that develop more slowly, such as Dhaka, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane. These urban places will face greater challenges in terms of poverty and creating opportunities for economic growth.⁷

Urbanization and city formation: Features, issues, and unsustainability

While the growth of urban centres has given millions of people access to what we call “progress”, social, demographic, economic, and political problems result when cities “become too big to be socially manageable and when such large cities distort the development of the surrounding countryside or even the whole society itself by drawing to themselves resources that are needed for more balanced growth nationwide”.⁸ As argued by Ernest Callenbach, this situation can be attributed to the rules of market-driven society: on waste – goods are cheap and disposable; on costs – trust the market, everything has its monetary price; on population – go forth and multiply; on energy – always do the cheapest thing, no matter what the consequences; on happiness – focus on accumulating material possessions; on relationships with other species – only humans matter; and on the future – let the future worry about the future.⁹ Such rules guiding people’s behaviour have led to a number of systemic problems.

John Clammer groups urban problems into 14 categories: extent, speed, and intensity of world urbanization; primate cities and their effects; rural depopulation and effects on hinterlands; poverty and labour issues, including problems of women and children; urban lifestyles and economy; physical infrastructure, such as roads, schools, health, water, power, and sewage; housing; pollution; land use and values; crime; stress and psychological problems; ethnic conflict; inequality and class issues; and social patterns and family instability.¹⁰ While some of these problems are specific to cities in either the developed or developing world, there is also a “convergence” – “declining infrastructure, deteriorating

urban environment, growing unemployment, fraying social cohesion, and institutional weakness”.¹¹ These issues have led to critical challenges to the sustainability of urban growth.

Imagining sustainable urbanization

The questions raised by urban growth are simple. Will cities be able to provide a suitable environment for the present and future human generations¹² to satisfy their basic, social, and cultural needs in a sustained manner across “earth time”¹³? Will natural resources be available and equitably distributed to achieve equity and equality across groups, space, and time?¹⁴ Will goods and services be adequately mobilized to provide for the high population concentration in the population giants? Will a vibrant, enabling local culture, which is actively engaged with globalization, be available to offer the inhabitants a distinct cultural identity,¹⁵ the basis for creativity and for developing the tools for cultural survival?

Such concerns have resulted in the transformation of discussion on urbanization to discussion on sustainable urbanization. While a more elaborate and useful discussion on the notion and history of the concept of sustainable development is presented by Rana and Piracha in Chapter 2, here we will pay attention to some key concerns of sustainable urbanization.¹⁶

- *Limits to urbanization.* Are there limits to urbanization? Will the complexity of the urban phenomena and the ensuing problems outweigh the initial advantages of sheer size? If our future is increasingly and inevitably urban, where do we and future generations live if cities become both physically and psychologically unhealthy places? What does this mean for planning?
- *Endangering local culture and heritage.* Urbanization has been a major threat to local and distinct cultures. Both material and non-material heritages are in danger of oblivion. Globalization and commercialization/commodification driven by hegemonic pressures of the global market move forward in the absence of community deliberation and endogenously agreed-upon cultural transformation. A loss of distinct urban culture is a loss of “place identity” and “people identity”. It confines culture to passivity and adaptation and puts into jeopardy the heart of culture, i.e. creativity and dynamic and active transformation.
- *Urban planning.* Solutions proposed by urban planners often exacerbate existing problems, and almost all Asian cities are testament to this situation. This reality of governance points to a fundamental question in politics and decision-making: should urban planning be expert-

directed and top-down, or decentralized, bottom-up, and directed by people in the community? When critical decision-making processes are globalized, how does one deal with and protect local path(s) of development? How can urban planning address the problems of sheer size, provision of goods and services, and loss of culture, location, and identity when sustaining urban population growth?

While this volume is sensitive to these problems and issues, it directly focuses on the second aspect and seeks to explore the role of culture in the sustainability of cities, thus going against the current of studies on urbanization and cities and their planning. The focus is not exclusively on cultural sustainability but also ecological,¹⁷ economic,¹⁸ and political sustainability, as these aspects are essential to achieving a “sustainable cultural city”.¹⁹ Exploring culture (and its core, creativity) in the context of urbanization and city formation is a critical step towards creating both sustainable cultural cities and a sustainable urban future.

Studies on city, culture, and planning

While there are a growing number of works on sustainability and Asian cities, studies tend to approach sustainability from an economic point of view. In this discourse, culture has no value if it makes no economic contribution. While there are studies on culture in an urban context, including those representing postmodern concerns, it is important to note here that a serious, sustained consideration of culture in sustainability of cities is almost entirely absent.

An overview of selected studies illustrates this situation. *Five Cities: Modelling Asian Urban Population-Environment Dynamics*²⁰ covers Faisalabad (Pakistan), Khon Kaen (Thailand), Cebu City (the Philippines), Pusan (South Korea), and Kobe (Japan), asking two basic questions: how do population and environmental conditions interact in specific urban areas; and how does that dynamic interaction produce a distinctive quality of life? The study is built on a simple model of population-environment dynamics. The four sectors of water, air, energy, and land use, which represent the environment, and three institutional sectors – production, transportation, and social services – interact to produce a “quality of life” in urban Asia. While attention to culture comes with the observation that the specific outcome of quality of life is affected by the social-political-economic-cultural system that governs the city, it is a secondary concern. *Culture and the City in East Asia* examines national capitals in late-industrializing countries, defending themselves against Western capitalism while trying to catch up with it.²¹ *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text* looks at “the way in which culture, ethnicity, languages, traditions, governance, policies and histories interplay in the

creation of the urban experiences”, and while culture is dealt with in all its complexity, sustainable urbanization is neglected.²² Similarly, Clammer’s classification outlined in the above section neglects the continued destruction or threat of destruction of local, distinctive material and non-material cultures, communities, and heritage of a city.²³ Major textbooks on the sociology and social geography of contemporary Asian cities are also insensitive to culture in sustainable development, and are dominated by four main issues: migration and its effects; the informal sector and its ramifications; cities, the state, and the new international division of labour; and the impact of structural adjustment policies of such agencies as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Development Bank. There is a dearth of studies and writing that articulate a cultural theory of a sustainable city in which (local) culture becomes a value of its own, not something merely seen as opposite to globalization and responding it, or something of economic value, or treated as postmodern reading of a text.

While the mainstream academic community has been developing its discourse on sustainable urbanization, culture, and cities, a different and alternative gathering of (Asian) NGOs, academics, and local authorities have been developing their own understanding and perspectives of the same. Three such efforts particularly relevant to this volume are the Yokohama Statement on Urban Cultural Individuality,²⁴ Our Cities, Our Homes: The People’s Agenda,²⁵ and Architecture: Future in Cities Declaration of Calcutta.²⁶ These three declarations offer a sustainable view of urbanization and city, and recognize the importance of (local) culture as well other issues that are of little concern in the mainstream, more often than not academic, discussion, such as gender or disability issues in urban/city areas.

The Kanazawa Initiative

The Kanazawa Initiative goes a step further in fully exploring a cultural theory of sustainable urbanization through culture, creativity, and sustainable governance. This three-year project was developed and managed from 2000 to 2002 by the Ishikawa International Cooperation and Research Centre (IICRC), based in Kanazawa, Ishikawa prefecture, Japan, in collaboration with the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS), based in Tokyo. The initiative focuses on *culture in sustainability of cities*, and was developed in three international conferences, the first two in Kanazawa and the last in Cheongju, Korea. The first conference focused on the cultural framework, and the second conference held in late 2000 focused on the creativity and adaptability of culture and presented case studies of Patan (Nepal), Penang

(Malaysia), Cheongju (Korea), and Kanazawa (Japan). The last conference in 2001 addressed the creation of cultural indicators as a critical tool to identify, record, and promote aspects of (local) culture in sustainability of cities.

About the content of this book

Chapter 2 on “Cultural frameworks” addresses the primary focus of the First International Conference on Culture in Sustainability of Cities, namely articulating a framework for understanding the role of culture in the sustainability of cities. The authors give a comprehensive background to sustainable development, sustainable urbanization, and cultural issues. The next chapter, “Voices I”, includes portions of papers presented at the first conference.

Chapters 5–9 cover the four case studies. The case study on Kanazawa, Japan, is concerned with a culturally sensitive *new production model*. The case study on Cheongju, Korea, explores the importance of creating and sustaining a *distinctive cultural identity*. The case study from South Asia, based in Patan, Nepal, explores the theme in terms of culture’s *internal transformation*. The case study of Penang, Malaysia, examines the various “discourses on sustainability” and attempts to capture the growing importance of *multiculturalism and localism*. The case studies present four approaches to modes of engagement with culture, enlisting culture in the broader effort for sustainable urbanization.

Chapter 11 focuses on cultural indicators, the theme of the third conference held in the historical-cultural city of Cheongju, Korea. This chapter covers the need to examine cultural indicators in order to assist cities to incorporate cultural aspects into overall and urban sectoral development policies and strategies. This chapter is followed by another entitled “Voices II”, which as before includes critical portions of papers that provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of cultural indicators. The concluding chapter reconsiders the major themes of the Kanazawa Initiative, opening theoretical and empirical areas that need further enquiry and research, and ends with a proposal for the promotion of an intellectual enterprise with policy and practical implications in the form of a “Kanazawa School of Sustainable Urbanization”.

Conclusion

This book takes a stand on the central importance of culture in achieving sustainability of cities. This is not just a scientific endeavour but also a

political one, consistent with the global recognition of the critical importance of sustainable cities, sustainable urbanization, and (local) cultures. As a minimum, it is hoped that this volume provides some approaches to responding to the Asian urban crisis by further consolidation and strengthening of the movement for culturally oriented sustainable urbanization and gives some starting points for initiating discussions and debates on an alternative urban theory and future: a “cultural theory of sustainable urbanization” and an achievable sustainable cultural city. The maximum is of course the development of a coherent cultural theory of sustainable urbanization that can influence university curricula and the action strategies of civil society organizations and policy-makers.

Notes

1. Opening lines of Kofi Annan’s message to the Global Meeting of the Sustainable Cities Programme and the Localising Agenda 21, Havana, Cuba, July 2005.
2. World Bank. 2003. *World Development Report 2003: Sustainable Development in a Dynamic World*. New York: Oxford University Press/World Bank, p. 108.
3. UNESCO. 2002. *Cities of Asia*, available at <http://whc.unesco.org/events/asiaciti.htm>.
4. Population Reference Bureau. 2005. *Human Population: Fundamentals of Growth Patterns of World Population*, available at www.prb.org/Content/NavigationMenu/PRB/Educators/Human_Population/Urbanization2/Patterns_of_World_Urbanization1.htm.
5. Roberts, Brian. 1999. “Urban management in Asia: Issues, priorities and opportunities”, paper presented at Asia Pacific Summit, Brisbane, 28 February–3 March, available at <http://hds.canberra.edu.au/cities/policy.html>.
6. UNESCO, note 3 above.
7. McGee, Terry. 2005. “Urbanisation takes on new dimensions in Asia’s population giants”, available at www.prb.org/Template.cfm?Section=PRB&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=3931.
8. Clammer, John. 1996. *Values and Development in Southeast Asia*. Kelana Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, p. 139.
9. Callenbach, Ernest. 1999. “Ecological ‘rules’ of a sustainable society”, in Takashi Inoguchi, Edward Newman, and Glen Paoletto (eds) *Cities and the Environment: New Approaches for Eco-Societies*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, pp. 19–22.
10. Clammer, note 8 above, p. 140.
11. Cohen, Michael. 1997. “Convergence, marginalisation and inequality: Directions for the urban future”, in Ismail Serageldin (ed.) *The Architecture of Empowerment: People, Shelter and Livable Cities*. London: Academy Editions, pp. 38–39. Cohen also observes that there is today a convergence of “resurgent localism”, a theme which is articulated in this volume.
12. Inherent in the notion of sustainability is a temporal order linking the future to the present and the past. This has been addressed by Sudarshan Raj Tiwari in the present volume.
13. The duration the planet Earth survives before it is destroyed by natural causes over which humanity has no control.
14. Consider the city of Tokyo, which may have resolved its density problem. Its ecological footprint is way beyond any notion of sustainability: “This means that for sustainable

- living, the people in Tokyo alone need an area of 45,220,000 ha – which is 1.2 times the land area of the whole of Japan. If mountains and other regions are discarded and only habitable land is included, then this becomes 3.6 times the land area of Japan.” See *Ecological Footprint of Tokyo*, available at www.gdrc.org/uem/observatory/jp-tokyo.html, June 2005.
15. A good exploration of these realities is found in Oncu, Ayse and Petra Weyland (eds). 1997. *Space, Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalising Cities*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books.
 16. Based on a discussion in Clammer, note 8 above, pp. 155–156.
 17. Used interchangeably with “environmental sustainability”.
 18. See King, Ross. 1999. “Sustainable urban design”, in A. F. Foo and Belinda Yuen (eds) *Sustainable Cities in the 21st Century*. Singapore: NUS, pp. 82–84.
 19. This is also something that came out strongly during a post-conference meeting after the First International Conference on Culture in Sustainability of Cities in Kanazawa, 18–19 January 2000. This meeting was attended by a small team of those who participated in the first conference, organizers, and those involved in the case studies. It was clear at this meeting that sustainable development went beyond mere concern for the environment to concern for the social context that makes possible environmental/ecological sustainability.
 20. Ness, Gayl D. and Michael M. Low (eds). 2000. *Five Cities: Modelling Asian Urban Population-Environment Dynamics*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
 21. Won, Bae Kin, Mike Douglass, Sang-Chuel Choe, and Kong Chon On. 1997. *Culture and the City in East Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press. Reviewed by Richard Child Hill. 2002. *Journal of Asian Studies*, February.
 22. Goh, Robbie B. H. and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (eds). 2003. *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text*. Singapore: WSPC, available at www.wspc.com.sg/books/eastasianstudies/5205.html.
 23. Clammer, note 8 above, p. 150.
 24. Sofjan, Sri Husnaini and Eugene Raj Arokiasamy (compilers). 2000. *Our Cities, Our Homes: A to Z Guide on Human Settlement Issues*. Penang and Kuala Lumpur: Southbound and Asia Pacific, pp. 168–169.
 25. *Our Cities, Our Homes*. “Meeting at the Asia Pacific Regional NGO Consultation on *Our Cities, Our Homes* held in Kuantan, Malaysia in April 1995 as members of citizen organizations and networks – representing a diverse range of interests including the environment, health, media and communications, youth, children, women’s development, housing, consumers, human rights, and development – we find that we share a common vision of a world of socially just, ecologically sustainable, politically participatory, economically productive, and culturally vibrant communities in which all people, women and men, people with disabilities, children, youth, adults, and the elderly live productive lives and prosper in peace and harmony. During the consultation, we have affirmed our shared commitment, forged new friendships and alliances, and built an agenda towards the realization of our vision.” Available at www.southbound.org.sg/2000/2000ch1.htm, August 2002.
 26. Sofjan and Arokiasamy, note 24 above, pp. 166–167. The declaration is the result of the International Workshop on Architecture and the Futures in Cities, Calcutta, 17–19 November 1995, organized by the Centre for Built Environment, Calcutta.

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