Urbanity, Revised

TO IMAGINE THE FUTURE
WE MUST RETHINK
THE MEANING OF A CITY

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Do you have any idea how much your buildings weigh?
—Buckminster Fuller

We have no art, we do everything as well as we can.
—Marshall McLuhan, quoting the people of Bali.

RIYADH—We are in the midst of a global reimagining. Practically everything we do is in flux. The cities we live in—our greatest cultural works at the biggest scale, and the highest synthesizers of all of our technological, scientific and artistic accomplishments—are being fundamentally reinvented. However, the old urban paradigms still dominate our collective imagination—
cars, buses, streets, parks, suburbs and central business districts. Traditional forms reach further back to city walls, city gates and city halls, and still inform the conceptual models of governance, the behavior of mayors and civic officials and even the definition of the citizen. Unconsciously, these concepts tie us to our past in the walled cities of Mesopotamia. They bind us to the boulevards of Hausmann, and the postwar suburbs of Levittown. When we think about the future of cities we still think with these outmoded mental models. Even though we know these cultural forms are being profoundly rethought, in the absence of new norms and forms, we maintain the old. While we may be in the process of reinventing the car and questioning the suburb, reimagining the park and redesigning the street, radically empowering the citizen and connecting the world into a single global urban system—all processes that continue to rock and reshape our cities—there is still no new consensus on the future of any one of these new forms that can be shared and broadly understood. In the absence of a new pattern that we can understand and embrace, we cling to what we know.

At a recent meeting in the Middle East, leading architectural urban design firms from around the world presented their work. Each spoke the new language of the sustainable future with impressive technical knowledge and beautiful renderings. But in the end, the development models presented had an almost bizarre sameness. It was as if there was an algorithm of relationships that produced a carpet pattern of “walkable neighborhoods” and “dense, transit-friendly development” that could be laid down no matter where in the world they were building. Although they were embracing the technological capacities, they were using them to re-build Paris—in a bizarrely modern, reconditioned world—everywhere.

However, massive change is upon us, and it opens onto an extraordinary vista of opportunities—and challenges. Contrast urban inertia with the clock speed of technological change where we are doubling our capacity every 12 months, inventing new products, systems and language. Paradoxically, in this time of great change and potential abundance, we must reinforce stability in order to allow citizens—individually and collectively—to support and engage new and fresh possibilities.

The other great paradox of this moment of massive change is that the greatest challenges we face are problems of success, not failure. If we had failed more, we would not have nearly as many problems. Had we failed more frequently, there would not be nearly seven billion of us. If Malthus was right, there would be fewer than a billion citizens on the planet, and we could behave like frat boys and never concern ourselves with our impact on the global ecology. But with a growing population expected to top more than 10 billion by mid-century, what we do adds up. And the impact of our success generates new, demanding and even life-threatening challenges.

MASSIVE CHANGE
Under these conditions, the urban potential of the global revolution of possibility that we call Massive Change is twofold:

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First, create wealth—embrace the extraordinary new capacities of the 21st century so that we can fully experience our collective potential for a brilliantly creative, abundant and equitable future.

Second, get to perpetuity—design a beautiful way of living that is equal parts ecology and economy; a way of being on the planet that is thriving—voluptuous, thrilling and plausible in the long term. Perpetuity suggests a way of being that doesn’t destroy the ecology we depend on, steal from our children, or leave them with our toxic legacy.

Cities will be a big part of accomplishing both of these ambitions. We are making great progress in this direction, but we still have a long way to go. There are profound inequities that lock a huge population of the world out of the development potential that exists. And we are still a million miles from perpetuity in any comprehensive sense. To get there, we will need new ideas that enable the values of Massive change and inspire people to make the changes that are necessary.

I have spent 25 years thinking about the city, occasionally working on the object of my affection. I have been fortunate to be invited to imagine urban visions for large-scale developments; create new models for the design of resource communities in the far north; develop a 1,000 year plan for the future of Makkah, the spiritual center of Islam; and lead a vision for a new post-oil sustainable city in the Middle East.

Over the last two and half decades there has been a revolution in the global urban reality as more and more of us moved to the city, finally surpassing more than half of the world population. We have also seen a revolution in our capacity to design at the scale of the urban systems. We have witnessed:

The development of global information technology and the Internet—a system of connection that changes everything. That system has accelerated the development of new tools like geographic information systems and global mapping.

The building of the physical equivalent of the Internet in the global system of logistics that enables just-in-time manufacturing and connects our economies and ecologies into a single network.

The creation of the science and practice of complexity and the development of new dynamic analytical tools with the capacity for understanding and visualizing urban systems.

The invention of new concepts for understanding our place in the network of life, like the Biomimicry movement and the cradle-to-cradle approach to design and manufacturing.

The development of new metrics for environmental development like the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design [LEED] program that quantifies performance in the built environment.

The design of new concepts in energy positive buildings like Pearl River Tower by Adrian Smith and Gordon Gill Architects.

The development of new city prototypes in India, China and the Middle East, like Norman Foster’s Masdar, an experiment in the synthesis of advanced sustainable urban living.
The explosion of the movement that is distributing ideas and potential through organizations like Habitat for Humanity and CEOs for Cities, who are working to quantify the economic dividends of the city and galvanize action in creating the next generation of great American cities.

And then there are the thoughts that exercise the urban imagination, that explore ideas and forms that might help shape our cities.

IMAGINE A CITY WITHOUT PARKS

The idea of the park is a concept that has come to the end of its useful life. The park is an island of intelligence in a sea of stupidity. The outmoded idea of a “park” cannot help but reinforce a fundamental problem that has inflicted untold damage—the separation of humans and the natural world. In the city, the “park” functions as an alibi, a moment of goodness in a field of bad. We use the park as a license, a small green permission slip that allows us to trash or pave everything else. We need to invert the diagram. We need a general condition of intelligence. For the foreseeable future we may need to tolerate islands of stupidity—places where we have yet to invent a solution to a particular problem—but the general condition ought to be one of intelligent sustainable abundance. With exceptions.

A couple of years ago I was invited to think about applying design to the city where I grew up. Sudbury is a tough mining town in Northern Ontario. The city has an extraordinarily beautiful context—the northern Canadian forest of the Precambrian Shield, the artistic subject of the most famous group of Canadian historical painters. In fact, Sudbury has 330 lakes inside the city limits. However, the legacy of the mining industry was a 30 mile dead zone around the city where not a blade of grass grew.

I proposed that instead of thinking about a city with a park, we think about the entire city as a park—a place of beauty and nature and delight—where 100,000 people make a living, raise their families. This way of thinking allows us to see ourselves in the context of the natural world with the responsibility of designing and maintaining the ecology that sustains us. In fact, this process in Sudbury had been underway for some time. In her recent book, *Hope for Animals and Their World*, Jane Goodall features Sudbury as an example of ecological recovery. Decades ago, a project to restore the surrounding ecology began, and today the forest around my home town is slowly coming back to life. Interestingly, a “Park of Desolation,” several hundred acres in its most toxic condition, is being maintained, allowed to stand as a monument to its past as a toxic desert.

IMAGINE A CITY WITHOUT MUSEUMS

My friend Giorgio de Cicco, Poet Laureate for the City of Toronto, once wrote about the difference between culture and cultural events, between art and art parties. He highlighted the poverty of a city that thinks that museums, and their fundraising dinners and blockbuster exhibitions, constitute culture. He set me thinking about the city as a work of art. Not a container for art. Not a place that has an “art program” or “special events.” But a place that is itself holistically conceived as a thing of beauty, a place where the beauty of food and music, the art of love and family, the creativity of work and life, all come together.

Somehow in North America, and to a great degree all over the world, we have allowed art to be marginalized. Imag-
ine if Venice had had a “1 percent for art” program during the Renaissance. I can’t imagine many people visiting Venice for 1 percent. Venice is art. Everything about it is intended to be the best we can be. Every sound. Every color. Every taste. Everything you touch or see or hear is created for you—to delight and demonstrate our brilliance. Everything is an affirmation of the human spirit. Art is the material the place is made of. We need a “99 percent for art” approach. We need an approach that imagines the entire city as an art work. Everything can be beautiful. It’s not a matter of money. Art doesn’t cost more. It just is more.

In the end, this is fundamentally a competitive issue. In a world of mobile capital and talent, money goes to beauty. If you want talent in your city—and money and innovation travel together—you need to create beauty. You need to demonstrate that culture is the core of your being. I’m with Claes Oldenberg on this one. In 1961, he wrote in his deliriously beautiful manifesto, “I am for an art that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.”

**Imagine a City Without Traffic**

The old car is toxic and stupid. The old car is dead. The most amazing thing about the 20th century design of the car is how effectively we were able to disguise its reality. If you were sitting in a room with an engine running you couldn’t hear yourself think you would be dead in no time. An internal combustion engine is a continuous toxic explosion. Think of a freeway as a poisonous river of fire. That is the 20th century reality of the car. But we disguised that. We designed a way for you to sip your Starbucks and listen to Vivaldi sitting on top of this continuous explosion. And more than any other design, this design of the car reshaped our cities and changed the world. Everywhere, we designed our cities for cars. Even places in the world where the people are dead set against the American values of liberal democracy, they embrace traffic. Traffic is the lingua franca of the 20th century.

Now imagine a car that is silent and clean and sexy and thrilling. It takes its energy from the sun. Or it produces energy and powers your home. Or it is powered by compressed air. This car doesn’t need to stay outside—you can park this car in your workplace or bedroom. This is the 21st century car. There is a wave of innovation happening that hasn’t been seen since the car was first invented. If you visit the Ford Museum in Detroit you will see the experiments that happened around the turn of the last century as we attempted to combine the wheel and the motor. Thousands of innovators, in hundreds of companies, invented every conceivable format—three wheels, two wheels, four wheels, electric, steam, internal combustion—which eventually settled into what we know as the car. That car evolved incrementally for nearly 100 years. Now we are reinventing the car at a higher order. We want the beauty and freedom and thrill of the car—without the environmental impact. The new car will also transform cities—in surprising and yet unknown ways. With the car defined in this new way, we open the suburb for a renaissance. Suddenly, the environmental equation is recast.

We must apply the same level of innovation to mass transit. After more than a century of change, the bus is still a bus. We are still using trains for transit, a model from the 19th century. We use
heresies
Stuart Brand, of Whole Earth Catalogue fame, identifies four environmental heresies—challenging the environmental movement to rethink its negative posture of protest, and arguing that the city is key to unlocking our sustainable future. On the other hand, Rem Koolhaas published the Harvard “Project on the City,” an effort that fully abandons the challenge of utopia for the luxury and comforts of cynicism. If the burning of Buckminster Fuller’s Geodesic Pavillion for Expo ’67 stands as an iconic image of the end of a utopian era, perhaps we can instrumentalize the burning of Koolhaas’s Chinese Television building—caught on YouTube video—as the bookend of the period of anti-utopian cynicism, and begin to herald the signs of a new era of urban imagination.

We should end this contemplation of the urban imagination with a paradox—a note on mental health and the political strategy of the city. The citizen can only embrace innovation from a place of confidence and stability. In order for the citizen to experience the potential of 21st century innovation and change, our political leaders must reinforce stability and security. The very notion of change may seem exciting to people like me, but it is terrifying to most. The paradoxical political project of the open and democratic city is to reinforce norms of conduct that enhance community and health in order to allow citizens the opening and opportunity to contemplate change.

In fact, the real objective of 21st century political urban leadership must be to establish Massive Change as a healthy democratic norm.