

In Between Future and Cities

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Staring to the copy of *The Image of a City* or *A Pattern Language* on my bookshelf, I began to wonder what architectural students would read these day as I dwell on pondering about this issue on Future Cities.

A brief online search on Future City is synonymous with more than familiar terms like Smart City, Digital City, Eco City, Low Carbon City, Liveable City, all would conceptually fall under the big sustainable umbrella. It is no mystery that our 21st century has been and will continue to build for attracting international executives or nomadic staff in which the very concept of sustainability has been continuously used as a socio-ecologically correct buzzword more than ever. Whether from big leaps of faith or human desperations, the planning and construction of new future cities are under way typically at some remote earthly conditions. These recent efforts have proven that their geographical locations and natural resources are no longer constraints. With ease of accessibilities and technological advancements, cities can essentially take place anywhere or actually nowhere onward. We, as a species, for one reason or another have been more ambitious than ever for bigger projects. We are so infatuated by the next mega project through our imaginations and political will, can be realized, sometimes even faster when imaginations are overtaken by our own technologies.

As we are coming to a closure to import case studies from the usual list of international cities like Manhattan, London, Tokyo or Amsterdam as references to build our future, together with judging from our polarized world views and

physically threatened under climate change, it is perhaps worthy to examine 'future' and 'cities', in the context of the topic of Future Cities. The year 2030 or 2050 has been consistently used to benchmark the critical notions on how urbanization, global population or some other earthly green matters would be projected. Too short it may be considering the evolution of human species collectively but base on our current complex global dynamics and impacts of climate change, the once distant tomorrow in fact is so much closer to our present moment. The notion of now is becoming the new Future.

Cities, a general term for urban settlements, are open for interpretations across different countries. Surely population size has a great impact towards the demand of physical settings and its qualities of urban environment. There are less than 70 cities in US and Europe together with a population of over 1 million whereas there are already 105 across China. The trend for such rise of mega-cities notably in Africa, India and China are expected to be challenged by what planners and designers would be described as placeless if not taken with cautions. Even so, as long as our blue marble continues to spin, cities will not cease to expand or build.

There were periods when timeless qualities were sought after in the architectural world. Nowadays, almost literally everything one can imagine can be materialized within matter of time where the future is either popularized or commercialized. The perception of great cities are no longer aspired as humanist utopia as our forefathers have deciphered. Economically driv-

en, they are now the potential promising markets for investments that new technological know-how can be exported. The common understanding of sense of place can also be so far removed that so much needed is to be re-created- that is if the few decision makers still desire.

Will there ever be a time in history when one should consider building less or at the least slower? Can all cities afford to grow with resilience or in fact some might just be too hopeless or costly for regenerate a next life? Or what would we advise our children their future choice of home, that is if without optimism, too many worthy choices remaining. It is then perhaps the notion that of a single perfect city that is typically confined by limited boundary should be argued, as suppose to a larger poly-centric region such as the recent efforts of the Greater Bay Area in southern China. Its larger area would seem more receptive to urban and green resilience while providing the benefit of choice for the dynamics of a larger population.

In this current technological era when human has almost defeated everything, time and space these days can feel compressed, distorted, and even collapsed. Except certain marginal regions due to political unrests, it is fair to say that many countries or cities have long passed the question of whether we can. The more pertinent question is if one can afford or if we should. Most certainly, a relatively uniform global model of technological modernity will be faster and more cost-effective to implement as one continues to race with time. When space and time are collapsed into a better make-belief reality

by AR, it begs the question if such technologies are to compliment or compete with the physical world. Our once sense of community is being threatened and become ever more so fragile that is slowly replaced by online communities.

At this age of bewilderment as the quest for mankind's future and more exemplary future cities are built across nations, it certainly begs the question if the world is a better place than before. If one is to project backward from 2050 as we are getting close to the end of smart or tech- driven cities, does that mean we have also invested enough on sustainability? Perhaps the question is less about Future Cities but Future Proof Cities. If one can stretch our imagination, what will then become the new index to measure the success of these future cities relative to today's criteria?

If good urban design in the physical sense ultimately is still about place making for civic pride and community, then perhaps they are more reasons to return to urban ideals that harness on timeless qualities of physical places. As we make way to technology advancement, it is just as important to rediscover and embrace the essence of the physical and tactile. Such technology in future cities should offer counter balance where solidarity, collaborations and optimisms are prioritized. A holistic urban ecology should include the resilience of different cities where technological innovations promote the rebirth of urban life and liveability.

Mankind wants to believe that our imagination is our only limit. Perhaps we may have no

limitations but our earth most certainly does. I am not sure what urban theorists Peter Lynch or Christopher Alexander would react to the recent urban feats but surely they would agree that it is always helpful to be reminded that any interventions should be well balanced towards any assets, human or natural, that cannot be substituted or replaced.

Welcome to the new order of Future Cities!!