CITIES AT THE INTERSECTION OF NEW HISTORIES

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By the mid-twentieth century, many of our great cities were in physical decay, losing population, economic activity, key roles in the national economy, and share of national wealth. As we move into the twenty-first century, cities have re-emerged as strategic places for a wide range of projects and dynamics. The Urban Age project allowed us to establish this directly for a set of very diverse cities.

MAKING NEW ECONOMIC HISTORIES

Critical, and partly underlying all the other dimensions, is the new economic role of cities in an increasingly globalised world. The formation of inter-city geographies is contributing a critical infrastructure for a new global political economy, new cultural spaces, and new types of politics. Some of these inter-city geographies are thick and highly visible – the flows of professionals, tourists, artists and migrants among specific groups of cities. Others are thin and barely visible – the highly specialised financial trading networks that connect particular cities, depending on the type of instrument involved, or the global commodity chains for diverse products that run from exporting hubs to importing hubs. These circuits are multidirectional and criss-cross the world, feeding into inter-city geographies with both expected and unexpected strategic nodes. For instance, New York is the leading global market to trade financial instruments on coffee, even though it does not grow a single bean. But a far less powerful financial centre, Buenos Aires, is the leading global market to trade financial instruments on sunflower seeds. Cities located on global circuits, whether few or many, become part of distinct, often highly specialised inter-city geographies. Thus if I were to track the global circuits of gold as a financial instrument, it is London, New York, Chicago and Zurich that dominate. But if I track the direct trading in the metal, Johannesburg, Mumbai, Dubai, and Sydney all appear on the map. The number of cities that get drawn into these inter-city geographies is growing fast. For instance, the top 100 global service firms together have affiliates in 315 cities worldwide. Looking at globalisation through the lens of these specificities allows us to recover the particular and diverse roles of cities in the global economy. While many of these global circuits have long existed, what began to change in the 1980s was their proliferation and their increasingly complex organisational and financial framings. It has been the new challenge of coordinating, managing, and servicing these increasingly complex, specialised and vast economic circuits that has made cities strategic.

MAKING NEW SPATIAL HISTORIES

It is perhaps one of the great ironies of our global digital age that it has produced not only massive dispersal but also extreme concentrations of top-level resources in a limited number of places. Indeed, the organisational side of today's global economy is located, and continuously reinvented, in what has become a network of about 40 major and not so major global cities; this network includes all the Urban Age cities. These global cities need to be distinguished from the hundreds of cities which are located on often just a few global circuits: while these cities are articulated with the global economy, they lack the mix of resources to manage and service the global operations of firms and markets. The reason for this new strategic role can be captured in the following microcosm: the more globalised a firm's operations and the more digitised its product, the more complex its central headquarter functions become and hence the more their execution benefits from dense, resource-rich urban environments.

As a result, the interaction of centrality and density takes on a whole new strategic meaning in global cities. The urban footprint of the global corporate economy keeps expanding; we can measure this expansion in kilometres and in growing densities. The five Urban Age cities we have worked with thus far all show expansion and multiplication of central spaces along with physical density. This is the urban form hosting an increasingly complex set of activities for the management, servicing, designing, implementing and coordinating of the global operations of firms and markets. Architecture, urban planning and civil engineering have played a critical role in building the new expanded urban settings for this organisational side of the global economy. This is architecture as inhabited infrastructure. The much talked about homogenising of the urban landscape in these cities responds to two different conditions. One is the consumer world, with homogenising tropes that help in expanding and standardising markets to the point they can become global markets. But this is to be distinguished from the homogenising involved in the organisational side of the global economy – state of the art office districts, airports, hotels, services, and residential complexes for the strategic workforces. This reshaping responds to the needs associated with housing these new economies, and the cultures and politics they entail. I would say that this homogenised environment for the most complex and globalised functions is more akin to an infrastructure, even though not in the conventional sense of that term. It is not simply a visual code that aims at signalling a high stage of development, as is so often posited in much of the commentary on the matter, and is the belief of many developers. We need to go beyond the visual tropes and the homogenising effect, no matter how distinguished

the architecture. The key becomes understanding what inhabits this homogenised state of the art urban landscape that recurs in city after city. We will find far more diversity and distinct specialisations across these cities than the newly built urban landscapes suggest. The global economy requires a standardised global infrastructure, with global cities the most complex of these infrastructures. But the actual economic operations, especially their organisational side, thrive on specialised differentiation. Thus as the global economy expands and includes a growing diversity of national economies, it is largely in the global cities of each of these that the work of capturing the specialised advantage of a national economy gets done. To do this work requires state of the art office districts and all the requirements of luxury living. In that sense then, much of this architectural environment is closer to inhabited infrastructure – inhabited by specialised functions and actors.

MAKING NEW URBAN HISTORIES

These conditions themselves have produced a variety of responses, from renewed passions for aestheticising the city, preserving the city and ensuring the public-space aspect of cities. The massive scale of today's urban systems has brought with it a revaluing of *terrain vagues* and of modest spaces – where the practices of people can contribute to the making of public space, beyond the monumentalised public spaces of state and crown. Micro-architectural interventions and informal architectures can bring built complexity into standardised spaces. This type of built complexity can in turn engage the temporary publics that take shape in cities in particular spaces at specific times of the day or night. Expanded informal economies are emerging as part of these advanced urban economies, evident in all our Urban Age cities, whether in the global North or South. It is easy to think of informalisation as anomalous, as belonging to an older order. But in my reading it is part of advanced capitalism. Informality assumes a whole range of new meanings. At the most abstract level it can be seen as multiplying the range of practices – economic, artistic, professional – possible in these cities. Complex cities allow for this multiplication and diversifying in a way that neat suburbs do not. While at one end of the scale informality is a form of injustice and powerlessness, at the other end it enables actors to 'make' new economies – and is a form of survival but also of creativity. Many immigrant entrepreneurs start informally, because it allows a more experimental form of business we might say. Many Silicon Valley tycoons started informally in garages. But we also saw informal architectural practices in all our Urban Age cities – from Mexico to Berlin.

The growing inequality and the massive concentrations of power now evident in major complex cities form a basic context within which some of these trends need to be situated. Cities have long had inequality, but what we see today alongside older forms is a new type of inequality. Homelessness has long been part of cities. But where it once concerned a single man – the hobo – now it is family homelessness, with children the largest share of homeless in large cities. These social and spatial inequalities probably assume their sharpest and most visible form in global cities. There are also new technical histories in the making. The city is one moment in often complex processes that are partly electronic, such as electronic markets, or part of hidden infrastructures, such as fibre optic cables. Embedded software for handling mass systems, such as public transport and public surveillance, is an often invisible layer in a growing number of cities. Such embedded software is guided by logics that are not necessarily part of the social repertory through which we understand those systems. As the use of embedded software expands to more and more infrastructures for daily life, we will increasingly be interacting with the artefacts of technology. Technical artefacts become increasingly actors in the networks through which we move. Buildings are today dense sites for these types of interactions. These acute concentrations of embedded software and of connectivity infrastructures for digitised space make the city less penetrable for the ordinary citizen.

RE-INVENTING THE POLITICAL

The city is also potentially the site where all these systems can become visible, a potential further strengthened by the multiple globalities, from economic to cultural to subjective, that localise partly in cities. This in turn brings up political challenges: at various points in history cities have functioned as spaces that politicised society. This is, again one of those periods. Today's cities are the terrain where people from all over the world intersect in ways they do not anywhere else. In these complex cities, diversity can be experienced through the routines of daily life, workplaces, public transport and urban events such as demonstrations or festivals. Further, insofar as powerful global actors are making increasing demands on urban space and thereby displacing less powerful users, urban space becomes politicised in the process of rebuilding itself. This is politics embedded in the physicality of the city. The emergent global movement for the rights to the city is one emblematic instance of this struggle. In urbanising rights it makes them concrete: the right to public space, to public transport, to good neighbourhoods. One question is whether a new type of politics is being shaped through these conflicts, a politics that might also make the variety of inter-city networks into platforms for global governance. Most of today's major social, political and economic challenges are present in cities, often in both their most acute and their most promising form: the sharpest juxtapositions of the rich and the poor, but also struggles for housing; anti-immigrant politics, but also multiple forms of integration and mixtures; the most powerful and globalised economies, but also a proliferation of informal economies; the most powerful real estate developers, but also the biggest group of builders in the world today -- people making shanty dwellings. How can we not ask whether networks of cities can become platforms for new types of global governance?

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