

Global Visions – Risks and Opportunities for the Urban Planet

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“Cities should be places where interaction and participation of citizens enable them to meet their own needs and aspirations, and those of the larger community, as well as allowing future generations to meet theirs” How far have urban cultures of the 21st century succeeded in fulfilling this ambitious aim set forth in the Brundtland report more than a quarter of a century ago? How do we transcend political and sectorial conflicts and vested interests to enable multi-stakeholder participation and partnerships to be established in decision-making and implementation? Are there good lessons we can draw upon to encourage and facilitate wider public awareness, education (both formal and informal) and capacity building to help empower individuals and communities to take direct action towards sustainable development and environmental protection?

These were only some of the issues put up for debate during a three day meeting at the National University of Singapore organized within the framework of the International Forum of Urbanism and the Centre for Sustainable Asian Cities in collaboration with the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore.

There seemed to be common understanding that in order to meet the challenges of an increasingly globalized urban development we need to recognize that urbanization is a complex morphological, sociological, cultural, ecological, economical, political, and ideological layering process along the historical axis and that understanding and acting upon this process needs a corresponding multi-disciplinary approach. An important point made at the conference was that often the softer aspects of the city or what may be termed the intangible urbanism are left out from the discussions on urban sustainability, or discussed as a separate entity. It is my firm conviction that bold steps should be taken by the whole community of artists, art educators and art researchers to regain lost positions in urban planning, and that these steps should be taken now, without hesitation or protraction.

The urgency of the situation was demonstrated in the discussion about the impact of globalization upon urban development. It was pointed out how this process often leads to cutting off the urban cultural heritage from its historical roots only to be integrated into a profit driven tourism business. This degradation of local cultural identity markers follows a process where cities are increasingly uprooted from their hinterlands. The domination of a globalized economic system makes local solutions ever more difficult.

Faced with these risks, how can the arts community intervene? Some models from greater Los Angeles of developing local culture, re-embedding the city within the region and integrating local meeting places into globalized city structures were discussed.

An even gloomier picture of a Metropolis Unbound was projected by a speaker pointing to the explosive growth of volatile, explosive mega-regions with worsening economic inequality and ethnic polarization leading to an obsession with security and surveillance, gated and guarded housing compounds – the suburban “privatopias.” It was pointed out that even a good willed belief in supplying basic infrastructure cannot correct social inequality and “spatial injustice”. There is an unequal distribution of risks living in the city (flooding, tsunamis, landslides often affecting slums and squatter settlements) with a lower chance of recovery after a disaster.

It will be the mission of the Journal of Urban Culture Research to follow up on the many challenges presented at the Singapore Conference and in line with the 2011 March URP Forum theme Arts Management – City Management promote the kind of multi-disciplinary research and cooperative action so urgently needed in our urbanizing world.