

# Directors of Urban Change: Mega-Urbanization in Asia

Agenda >  
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By Freek Colombijn & Peter Nas

Asian cities have grown throughout the twentieth century during periods of turmoil (for example, the Chinese Revolution and the Partition of India and Pakistan), economic boom (Asian tigers), and economic decline (the Asian crisis). The share of the Asian population living in cities has gone up from 9 per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 2000, and it is envisaged that in 2025 more than 50 per cent of the Asian population will reside in cities.

Currently, the Asian cities face new challenges, which stem for a considerable part from their position in an increasingly volatile, globalized economy and culture. The flows of people, goods, capital, information, technology, and images have swelled enormously. In this new context, which Manuel Castells has called the 'network society', cities are important as sites for services, social status, and individual self-gratification of the elite. As far as urbanization is concerned, the rise of the network society translates into the management of the exponential increase of people, information, resources, waste, and traffic in the major cities; brain-drain in small and medium-sized towns; the expansion of hub functions; and the perplexing question of how to create an imaginative cityscape that is

Urbanization has been one of the most persistent developments in Asia during the twentieth century. Asia figures prominently on the list of the world's fifteen largest cities with Shanghai, Tokyo, Beijing, Bombay, Calcutta, Jakarta, Seoul, and Madras. Numerous policy- and decision-makers, i.e. the directors of urban change, have visionary ideas about urban form. The rise of the network society in conjunction with the globalization of modern and postmodern architecture and urban planning has forced policy-makers in Asia to develop new ideas about the future of the city. Freek Colombijn and Peter Nas are working out a research programme that aims to deal with the 'directors of urban change' and their ideas and visions.

capable of attracting and retaining investors and casual visitors.

The city is 'an act of will' and the numerous policy- and decision-makers, i.e. the directors of urban change, create representations of the urban space. The 'directors of urban change' are defined as actors who have explicit ideas about urban development and who are in a position to formulate and influence future developments. The directors of urban change consist of various actors such as urban planners, architects, road-builders, city administrators, real estate developers, financiers, non-governmental organizations, scholars, and visual, performing and literary artists. These professional urbanites can be found at the local, national, and international levels, and the directors of change are considered part of the network society, the most important among them functioning as nodes. These professional urbanites have visionary ideas about urban form, they negotiate how urban space should be shaped, and, if possible, try to appropriate this space.

## Questions

The two main questions are (1) how do the directors of new urban developments in Asia envision the future and (2) how do the directors succeed in realizing their ideas? The first question can be specified by questions

such as: Who are the directors of future urban developments? What are their ideas on or concepts of urban change? From what sources do their ideas derive? And to what extent are the ideas of the directors compatible with each other's ideas, with traditional, local concepts of urbanization, and with the present built environment? The ideas and visions of the directors are only important if they are realized in a particular city or are considered influential in a more general way. The next step will be to elaborate on the balance of power between the various directors and the political games they played in their attempts to appropriate and mould urban space. This leads to the following questions: How are these directors linked through networks? To what extent do they manage to realize their visionary ideas? To what extent do they succeed in introducing institutional change, such as legal frameworks or training programmes, in order to increase the influence of their own faction on urban forms in the long run? Why are some directors more successful in realizing their ideas than others?

We may conclude that the cities in Asia, and more specifically in Indonesia, are very important, all the more so because of the tremendous growth, which is turning them into mega-urban regions. The processes of

mega-urbanization are partially spontaneous and partially planned. Scientific knowledge on the interplay of spontaneous growth and planned development in the context of current mega-urbanization is very limited; this is why further study of mega-city formation processes is of the utmost importance.

We are developing a research programme that will investigate the directors of change, and their visions and ideas, in Asian mega-cities. As a

first step a workshop on this theme will take place in Leiden, 12-14 December 2002. It will adopt a comparative approach, not only contrasting Asian cities with each other, but also assessing the development of European and, perhaps, American cities. In the nineteenth century, London, Paris, Vienna, Milan, and Berlin were among the first modern cities with populations of over one million inhabitants and their examples can be instructive. But in the 'network society' the crucial distinction is no longer between the West and the developing world, but between places which are more or less connected or disconnected to global networks. <

*Dr Freek Colombijn lectures at the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia and Oceania, Leiden University. He is an anthropologist and historian specializing in Indonesia and has published on urban development, environmental change, football, state formation, and violence in Indonesia.*  
f.colombijn@let.leidenuniv.nl

*Dr Peter J.M. Nas is affiliated with the Department of Social and Cultural Studies, Leiden University. He is Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology, Leiden University. His main topics of interest are urban and applied sociology and anthropology with a regional focus on Indonesia, where he has conducted fieldwork.*  
nas@fsw.leidenuniv.nl



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