

Directors of Urban Change in Asia and Europe

Report >
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As the absolute and relative numbers of Asians living in cities are ever increasing, the population of countless Asian cities has reached over a million residents and some cities already have more than ten million inhabitants, it was more than expedient to organize a workshop on the so-called 'directors of urban change'. These 'directors' may be defined as actors with clear ideas about urban development and who are in a position to formulate and influence future developments. Two major questions are, then, to be asked: (1) what do the directors of new urban developments envisage for the future; and (2) how do the directors manage to realize their ideas? In dealing with these questions at the workshop 'Directors of urban change', most participants chose to discuss the current development of one or two Asian cities.



Hong Kong as seen from Victoria Peak.

By Freek Colombijn & Peter J.M. Nas

Whereas, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe was the continent where most of the largest cities were to be found, today eight Asian locations figure prominently on the list of the fifteen largest cities in the world: Shanghai, Tokyo, Beijing, Bombay, Calcutta, Jakarta, Seoul, and Madras. Their unprecedented rate of population growth and absolute population figures, ranging from twelve to twenty-three million inhabitants, pose considerable problems for their directors of urban change, problems that the European cities were never forced to face.

In order to enrich the comparative perspective, the workshop also invited papers on the European cities of London, Rome, and Cologne and on medium-sized Asian cities, including some relatively small national capitals, such as Colombo and Kuala Lumpur. Small as they may be (Colombo having a population of less than a million inhabitants), the national governments are already interfering with urban management and have ambitions to attain global status for their capital. Other participants contributed papers on provincial capitals and the way their urban administrators aspire to the example of the, larger, national capital. Some 'chains of aspirations' were discerned. For example, the Indonesian provincial capitals of Makassar, Surabaya, and Padang copy models derived from the national capital. Meanwhile, Jakarta looks for inspiration at Singapore: smaller but far more modern. Singapore, in turn, is envious of Tokyo: the only large and modern city in the Pacific region.

A directly tangible result of the workshop is the planned publication of most of the papers in a collective volume. Only when the final versions of the

papers have been submitted will the workshop organizers attempt to draw firm conclusions, but a few tentative general observations can already be made.

Directors of urban change are competing for (international) investors. One way to attract investors is by creating an imaginative, spectacular, yet functional cityscape. Upon joining the regional or global competition for investors, urban administrators must comply with international standards of what is supposedly an imaginative architecture; cityscapes thus tend to become uniform. Yet, ironically, for their city to be distinct from others, the urban administrators need to come up with something divergent from standard architecture. Local and provincial city administrators and national governments, making a showcase of their respective national capitals, are locked in this paradox. Also, real estate developers involved in housing projects face the same dilemma, torn between fulfilling universal requirements and the need to build something distinctive. It is a paradox that also lies at the root of the 'chains of aspiration' noted above.

Another issue is that directors of urban change of all sorts, including the urban administration, the national government, real estate developers, the

president's wife, and grassroots NGOs, show no intention of cooperation. Their clashing visions, or indeed complete lack of vision of how to develop a city, generally result in a rather disorderly end product. More than anywhere else, perhaps, this is the case in cities situated in countries going through a transition from a strict regime to a more liberal (capitalist) economy. Examples can be found in Tehran, Nanjing, the Pearl River Delta, and Hanoi.

Can the natural environment be considered a director of urban change? One author's case in point, though stretching the concept a little too far, was quite well made. Issues of wastewater and solid waste management, land subsidence due to over-extraction of ground water (leading to regular floods), and badly polluted air are important issues to be addressed, especially in mega-cities.

As a follow-up to the workshop, conveners Freek Colombijn and Peter Nas, in close cooperation with some of the participants, are trying to acquire funds to develop the workshop's theme into a research programme with junior scholars, with the hope that specific themes relating to the concept of directors of urban change may then be elaborated in subsequent workshops. ◀

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Editors' note >

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