

LWK
+PARTNERS
ENVELOPE

01 URBAN PLANNING & REGENERATION

LWK+ PARTNERS is an internationally recognised architecture and design practice with its roots in Hong Kong. We are a platform of experts who design and deliver world-class solutions for the built environment.

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MISSION STATEMENT

This journal is the first installment of a three-part series entitled *Red Envelope*, and is themed 'Urban Planning & Regeneration'. It was published by LWK + PARTNERS in May 2020 and aims to provide knowledge and insight on global urban design for readers interested in architecture, design, development and the built environment.

The *Red Envelope* journals are available in digital formats on LWK+ PARTNERS' website: lwkp.com.

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FOREWORD

Drawing from Chinese and South East Asian societies, which share the custom of giving gifts in red envelopes or packets, LWK + PARTNERS' three-part *Red Envelope* series seeks to freely share thought and insight as a global source of knowledge.

Conceived as part of LWK + PARTNERS' recent transformative relaunch, which involved the opening of its Dubai office in 2018 and the start of a new approach to being a global design, innovation and knowledge leader, the *Red Envelope* series is a platform for exchanging insight, information and data that deepen our understanding of the global built environment. Despite the surge in digital media, it also made sense for us to develop something that was not only informative and lovely to read, but that also made you want hold onto it, revisit and collect it.

As the series' first installment, this journal offers a platform for pondering possibilities - urban design and architecture are at a crossroads. As an urbanist myself, I question their role as the stage for the perpetuation of human culture, which, if not recognised and redefined, may find their current lackadaisical condition to be terminal, witnessing the continued diminution of their status as perpetrators. The work of the architect is a work of imagination, yet it cannot simply be a dominating gaze, an act of whim, or, conversely, a sacrifice at the altar of commercial interest alone.

Rather, the architect or urbanist's role could be something different, something that is investigated, explored, tested; a reconciliation and a point of reference for more than itself. Cities have long fascinated architects and urbanists of all generations and cultures. Some designers look for new forms of order and stability, while others seek a dynamic redefinition of urbanity.

Thinking about responsive and contextual urban design and regeneration starts with places that we choose to call home, and for the majority of us, 'home' is the city. But as our metropolises continue to expand while new ones emerge, it is clear that not all are made equal.

Some cities just work, while others flounder and fail. So what are the necessary ingredients for building a city or an urban environment that adds value to the quality of life for its citizens and not just for the elite or those living in gated communities? How do we get those key urban balances right, like the need for safety along with the buzz of 'a place - a culture', or the desire for private space as well as public parks?

In this first issue, we do not propose that all urban environments are equal or need the polished efficiency of modern, wealthy megalopolis. Some of the places that respond in the right urban way are often held together by brown string and sticky tape, and yet still possess the quality-of-life and way of doing things that are seductive, responsive and effective.

Our journal is a global chronicle of the people, places and ideas that aim high, deliver innovation, challenge the conventions and force us all to reevaluate our own perceptions. The essays laid out ahead operate within the disciplines of the built environment, while furthering interdisciplinary understanding across five contrasting horizons.

LWK + PARTNERS's design director, Kourosh Salehi, addresses very prescient challenges around global security, and how natural and man-made disasters have always shaped the planning of cities. Mohamed Adel Dessouki explores the lives of the world's oldest planned, still inhabited street which continues to reflect the ongoing transformations of an ever-evolving city. While, one year on from the 2019 revolution in Sudan, Ola Diab explores how a country's streets and buildings have been given a make-over, courtesy of Sudanese street artists.

In India, Nipun Prabhakar shares how a community in Gujarat responds to an emergency re-urbanisation plan following the disastrous 2001 earthquake. One particular case study takes us to Sardar Nagar, a rehousing settlement that threatened to become a slum of thousands.

Elsewhere, our editor engages in a conversation with Syrbanism, a community of urban practitioners and thinkers who want to contribute to development alternatives and be active in creating avenues where better urban solutions can be created, analysed, exhibited and popularised. Lastly, we discover Baghdad's original urban design, which marked the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate.

We hope our general optimistic take on the world, and in particular our urban environments, will find a following of readers looking for fresh glimpses and aspirations in both emerging and established markets. Because in a world where digital media is establishing new paradigms of communication and challenging perceptions of traditional communication, urbanism and architecture may indeed be able to carry continued value, conveying meaning through physical metaphor and embodying cultural understandings by creating places for all to cherish.

Kerem Cengiz
Managing Director
LWK + PARTNERS, MENA

EDITOR'S MESSAGE

At the time of writing this, the world, as we know it, is in great flux. Each day brings with it a fresh set of challenges and disruptions to what we once accepted as the 'day to day'. It is now completely predictable to be confronted with the unpredictable, and as we jump and shift to keep up and adapt, there is a small joy in the time given to us – or the time frozen, depending on how you see it – and that joy is the opportunity to reflect, and re-engage with lost stories and lost lessons.

Something I fear is that after humanity learns how to manage the Covid-19 pandemic, the time before 2020 will become an abstract reality, with its stories, experiences and knowledge something of an obsolete lens with which we use to analyse 'before'. And while this journal was conceived before the global spread of the novel Coronavirus, it does help to chronicle unique stories from around the world that can help us move forward, that offer us something to learn from.

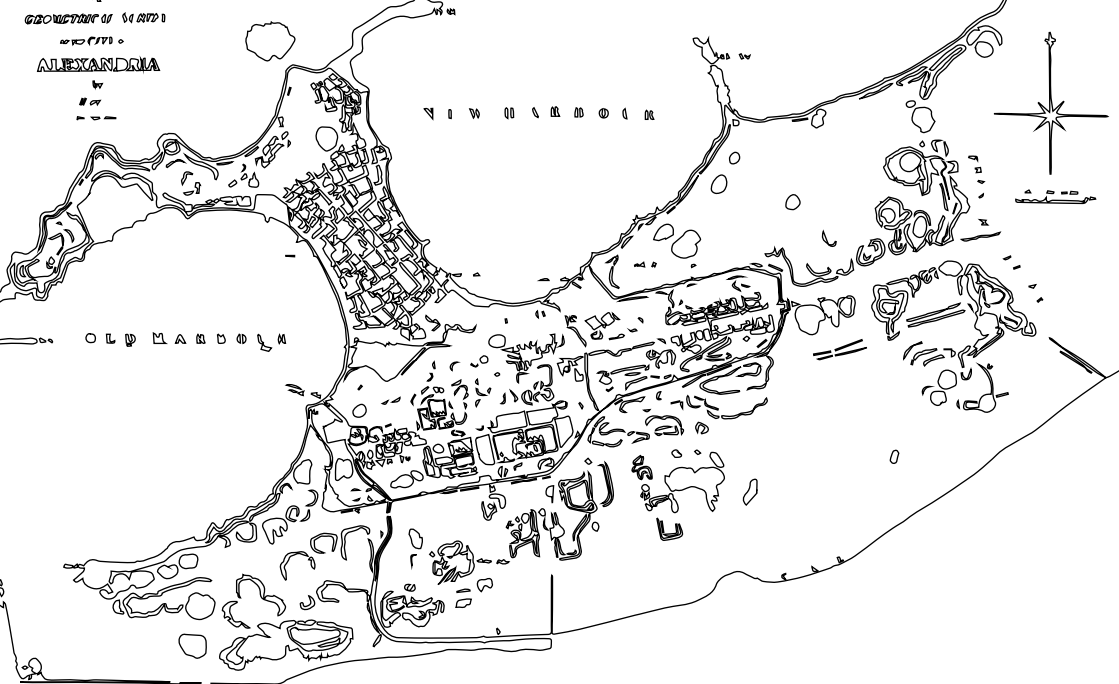
The theme, 'Urban Planning & Regeneration', is an umbrella term. It encapsulates a wide variety of disciplines and urban forms, and this journal is an ode to that wealth of diversity. From emergency planning in India to local artists in Sudan beautifying their streets in a post-Revolution Khartoum, the stories here offer documentation and anecdotes of architectural and urban history. While likely to be appreciated by architects, planners and designers, I believe they will be insightful for the general public too – as they are, at the end of the day, stories of human perseverance.

A lot of research and planning went into this journal – as with the rest of the *Red Envelope* series. The contributors, for whom I am grateful, brought the stories to life, sought the unknown details and faces, and delivered nuance, delicacy and truth. I encourage readers to visit our contributor's page, where a short but sweet bio of each writer can be found – highlighting the person behind the words.

No one can predict how the world will look come 2021. Some of us maintain educated guesses, but I think many have come to the conclusion that we can never be certain. So while the built environment and our experience of it may change drastically from now till then, LWK + PARTNERS and myself offer these 36 pages as a platform of sorts, where we invite readers to learn something new, analyse the lessons shared by communities elsewhere in the world, and regain a bit of hope and excitement.

Rima Alsammarae

Editor



The street also witnessed another type of procession – that of the “outcasts and criminals” who were cursed by the public as part of their condemnation and punishment. The rich account of events and accidents provided by the book illustrates very well “the multifaceted nature of the Via Canopica’s social function throughout antiquity – at once a via sacra, a via triumphalis, and a via dolorosa.”

ENVELOPE 01

Between City and Sea

Location: Alexandria, Egypt **Author:** Mohamed Adel Dessouki

23 centuries after it was first drawn in sand, the world’s oldest planned, still inhabited street continues to mark the ongoing transformations of an ever-evolving city.

If you were to walk down Fouad Street in Alexandria, it might not immediately stand out. Although home to a number of cafes, restaurants, cinemas and apartment complexes, the city’s large thoroughfare blends into its surrounding environment, which hugs the Mediterranean Sea on the northern coast of Egypt. With origins dating back to 331 BC, when it was known as Via Canopica (or the Canopic Road), Fouad Street launched the birth of Ptolemaic Alexandria, and is the world’s oldest planned street that’s still inhabited today – more than 23 centuries after it was first drawn in sand.

His vision for the street was clear: it would traverse Alexandria longitudinally to be its main artery for movement and activity, starting from the east by the Sun Gate that leads to Canopus, a small, nearby city, and stretching to the Moon Gate, five kilometres to the west.

It was April of 331 BC when Greek architect and planner Dinocrates of Rhodes walked steadily toward the eastern side of the construction site of the new city, outlined in chalk and barley grains. His vision for the street was clear: it would traverse Alexandria longitudinally to be its main artery for movement and activity, starting from the east by the Sun Gate that leads to Canopus, a small, nearby city, and stretching to the Moon Gate, five kilometres to the west. The colonnaded street, he planned, would be five times wider than all the other streets in the city – more than a *plethrum* wide. This main road would divide the city into two main sections: a northern one, to host public and institutional facilities, and a southern one, dedicated to residential districts.

Dinocrates was committed to his scheme, which he believed would accomplish Alexander the Great’s aspirations of creating the ideal city, rising up with a Hippodamian network of streets, fortified walls and amazing buildings.

Today, the reasons behind Alexander the Great’s choice of this particular site for a new large capital are not clear. It’s also not clear if the orientation of the city was deliberate, or if Dinocrates really did manage a 30-metre-wide street, as asserted in classical resources (yet conflicting with Mahmud al-Falaki’s 1866 seminal study which concluded that the street was only 14 metres wide). What we do know, though, is that only a few decades after the start of its construction, Ptolemaic Alexandria became an exceptional Hellenistic megapolis, the capital of the world, with an unprecedented lighthouse (the Pharos) and unique institutions founded and sponsored by Ptolemy I Soter and his successors (332-30 BC).

23

It’s 23 centuries old
(the street was first
drawn in sand in 331 BC)



It was originally planned by
Dinocrates of Rhodes
for Alexander the Great



By the mid-19th century, the road
became home to “elitest residences”
of families from foreign communities

During this phase, the street witnessed the construction of a number of notable public buildings, such as the Theatre Zizinia and the Graeco-Roman Museum, to name a few, but the dominant building typology was the “elitist residences” of families from foreign communities (that formed the cosmopolitan society of Alexandria).

In his 1996 book, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict*, historian Christopher Haas provides a fascinating account of the social functions of Via Canopica throughout antiquity. Haas believed that the road served as an urban stage for the people of Alexandria's most important religious rituals, whether pagan or Christian, and civic ceremonies, which ranged “from the great religious procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-47 BCE) ...to military parades occurring during the Mamluk period (A.D. 1250-1517).” The street also witnessed another type of procession – that of the “outcasts and criminals” who were cursed by the public as part of their condemnation and punishment. The rich account of events and accidents provided by the book illustrates very well “the multifaceted nature of the Via Canopica's social function throughout antiquity – at once a via sacra, a via triumphalis, and a via dolorosa.”

By the start of the 16th century, Alexandria suffered a long period of urban decline due to a series of successive natural disasters, diseases and neglect. It took the city three centuries to bring this enormous decline to a stop, and by the mid-19th century, the city began to witness an upswing of development again.

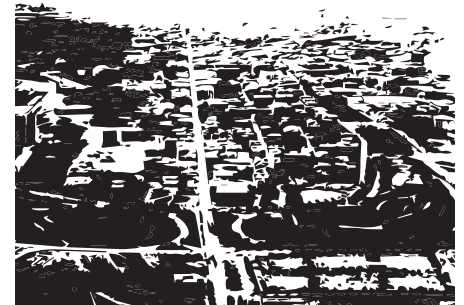
To understand this phase, we can refer to a 1998 report by the Alexandria Preservation Trust (APT), a privately funded entity founded by the Alexandria-based architect Mohamed Awad. In his report, Awad

traces the street's development throughout the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The Rue de la Port Rosette, or simply Rue Rosette, was a successful revival of the ancient Canopic Way, a result of the city's expansion towards the east thanks to the economic growth fostered by the policies of Viceroy Mohamed Ali and his successors.

During this phase, the street witnessed the construction of a number of notable public buildings, such as the Theatre Zizinia and the Graeco-Roman Museum, to name a few, but the dominant building typology was the “elitist residences” of families from foreign communities (that formed the cosmopolitan society of Alexandria at the time). Most of these were designed and constructed by Italian architects and contractors. The architecture of both public and private buildings was eclectic – basically Neo-Classical and Neo-Renaissance, in addition to the then-contemporary Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles. This was followed by another wave of elegant apartment blocks, also eclectic in style, right after the end of WWI, when the street was renamed Fouad I Street after the new sultan and king of Egypt. Later, in the 1940s and 50s, Art Deco and Early Modernist cinemas were introduced in addition to other entertainment facilities such as coffee houses and pastry shops.

Following the 1952 Revolution, Fouad I Street witnessed “a mass exodus” of the city's foreign communities, as Awad calls it. The street itself was renamed once again to Gamal Abdel Nasser Street, which is still its official name. Most of the mentioned elitist residences were confiscated and reused as schools and other public facilities, as part of the Revolution's nationalist movements, and then left without maintenance for decades.

Most of the street's residential blocks were also victims of the 1960s rent control policies, where the owners of the buildings were not allowed to increase rents or terminate rental contracts during the lifetime of their tenants, and consequently, both parties became unwilling to maintain the buildings, which were left to decay. Furthermore, new building laws allowed higher building heights, which encouraged many owners and investors to demolish the historical buildings, substituting them with much higher, poorly designed blocks. The once dominant character of the street started to wane gradually.



The road served as a stage for religious rituals, civic ceremonies, military parades, as well as the walk of shame for outcasts and criminals.

Aside from the persistent aspiration for demolition and rebuilding, an emerging segment of the private sector has recently shown a different kind of interest in the historical buildings of the street. Some of the buildings are increasingly being reconsidered as valuable assets once again, amid increasing speculations about upcoming legislative changes that might end the above-mentioned rent control, which would increase their monetary value significantly thereafter. Although this gives some hope towards safeguarding these important buildings, there are concerns about the gentrification side effects of such attitudes.

Despite being renamed, the residents of Alexandria still refer to the street as Fouad Street, which reflects how attached they are to the street's heyday, apart from any political orientations. Regardless of any upcoming changes, Fouad Street will persist as the city's greatest marker of its historical transformations.

After the Snake Moves

Location: Gujarat, India **Author:** Nipun Prabhakar

In Bhuj, a municipality in the Kutch district of western India's Gujarat, a network of community members, government officials and non-profit development organisations worked together to devise an emergency re-urbanisation plan following the disastrous 2001 earthquake. One particular case study takes us to Sardar Nagar, a rehousing settlement that threatened to become a slum of thousands.

According to folklore, beneath the ground in Bhuj, in the Kutch district of western India's Gujarat, lives a snake. Long ago, when the king wanted to settle the land and build his kingdom, he was told that he would have to thrust a nail into the ground and spear the snake through its head to make the earth stable. The king did so, but, curious and unsure of himself, he quickly removed the nail to evaluate his aim. The snake survived and, according to the legend, it now lives beneath the ground, shaking the earth when it moves and causing quakes across the region. This is why whenever a new building is inaugurated in Kutch, the first ritual is to drive a nail in the ground to stabilise the building.

On 26 January, 2001, during a crisp winter morning in Kutch, the earth started to violently shake. In a span of 22 seconds, an earthquake with the magnitude of 7.7 rippled across the city, causing around 18,000 people to lose their lives. Those 22 seconds remain etched deeply in the minds of the people of Kutch – and today, everyone has an earthquake story to tell.

Most of the original buildings, though, are no longer there to narrate the stories as the earthquake destroyed 40 percent of the homes, eight schools, two hospitals and four kilometres of road in Bhuj. The buildings that remain tell the story of the devastation through their cracks – noticeable markers of recent history which mimic the streets of the old Bhuj city: congested, bottlenecked, organic, dead-ended. The rubble from the earthquake choked the narrow streets and blocked the first responders and emergency servicemen from reaching the affected areas. As the local adage goes, earthquakes don't kill people, buildings do.

Disasters, whether man-made or natural, have historically presented the opportunity for rapid change. The Gujarat government, along with active regional NGOs, like the Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan (KNNA) and the Environmental Planning Collaborative (ECI), took the 2001 earthquake as a chance to replan the damaged old city block using a Land Adjustment Scheme. After initial discussions, decision-makers were provided with two options: the total relocation of the old city to a new Bhuj, or the replanning and rebuilding of the old city itself.

After lengthy public discussions and protests, a middle ground was forged which suggested partial reconstruction and partial relocation. A detailed development plan was proposed recommending the paving of new wide roads and loops that offered better access and connectivity of the walled city to the surrounding districts. Areas for city level infrastructure, like water supply, sewerage, storm water design and public buildings, were also identified.

The residents, however, were apprehensive about abandoning their 500-year-old settlement and readjusting to the city outskirts. To calm their fears, a new town planning scheme was developed: those who wanted to stay in the old city and who could produce legal documents of their plots had to contribute some land that could help connect the dead ends, provide arterial roads, open spaces and other infrastructure. The buildings that were destroyed faced land deductions ranging from 10 to 35 percent based on the area they occupied. And the buildings which were still standing were spared from the land deduction with road layout done keeping them in mind. The other residents who wanted to resettle quickly, or those who could not produce legal documents of their housing, were incentivised to move to resettlement colonies with much bigger plots than what they previously had.



All images by Nipun Prabhakar

Sardar Nagar

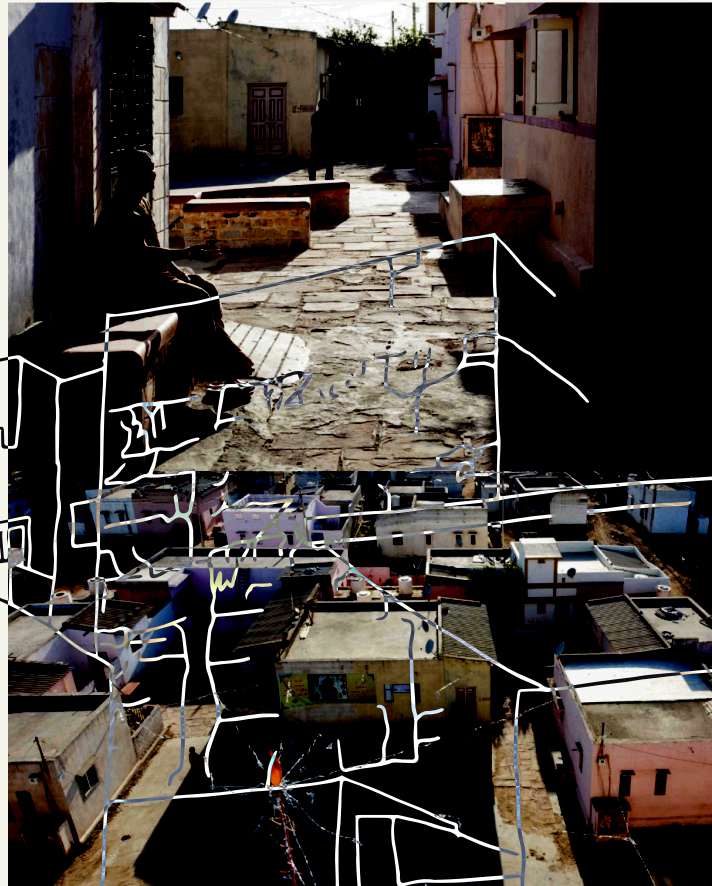
The need for shelter immediately after the earthquake was fulfilled by temporary relocation sites provided by the government; however, one such location, Sardar Nagar, which sits on the eastern side of Bhuj, threatened to become a permanent slum of 2,000 families.

KNNA and the Hunnarshala Foundation (HSF), in collaboration with the local government, were invited by some of Sardar Nagar's residents to help devise a rehabilitation plan. Many community members had been tenants in old Bhuj, for whom the earthquake rehab packages did not sufficiently provide for. Unlike other resettlement colonies in Kutch, this one had a heterogeneous population of 16 different ethnic groups.

HSF, a collective of building experts, social workers and activists, devised the masterplan of the settlement. It was also responsible for the design and construction of the homes, the design and construction of the sewerage and treatment plant, social facilitation, and coordination with local authorities and banks. A combination of community knowledge, personal verification and legal frameworks were used to arrive at an eligible list of homeowners.

According to Sandeep Virmani, the director of HSF, the collective developed the masterplan by exploring how a village can be inside a sector rather than outside in the outskirts. The housing typology was therefore influenced by the working principles of courtyard-community-living in the old city – a means towards climate control, privacy and security, as well as towards finding solutions to several of the modern needs and problems of growing cities. The plan accommodated the networked, porous quality of traditional rural settlements of Kutch by introducing a hierarchy of interconnected community spaces that vary in level of privacy (from the *otla*, or sitting bench, to the *faliya*, or familial courtyard).

The whole resettlement of Sardar Nagar was built in five phases: the first three phases were built by HSF, after which the government took over and made plotted rows. The initial phases included housing clusters with five to eight houses set around a communal courtyard. The smaller clusters were then combined around a larger communal courtyard. Apart from the housing, spaces were demarcated for three schools, a commercial market and an allotted space for informal markets to thrive.



The buildings that remain tell the story of the devastation through their cracks – noticeable markers of recent history which mimic the streets of the old Bhuj city: congested, bottle-necked, organic, dead-ended.

Insufficient funds and the will to use sustainable building materials encouraged HSF to explore low-cost, earth-construction techniques, like stabilised earth blocks, rammed earth, and recycled china clay waste. The houses needed to be built with flexibility and adaptability in mind – thus, they were designed for incremental growth.

Over the years, daily life needs, aesthetic preferences and aspirational paint jobs have slowly overtaken the spotless exposed rammed earth walls and minimalist courtyards. This is the success of the owner-driven and community-participation-based model of HSF, where the people are given the power to design with the architects and slowly overtake when they leave.

Be it the old city reconstruction project or Sardar Nagar housing, no 'people-centric' project can be successful without the resilience of the locals and their generosity of spirit. By multiple successful examples of reconstruction, Bhuj has shown the world a way of reconciliation through, as Virmani said, *Parampara*, a sanskrit word meaning tradition combined with the process of change. This is in keeping with the syncretic cultural ethos of India, which has always upheld a diversity of thought and accommodated the new into the traditional, renewing and nourishing the old.

Q&A with Syrbanism

Author: Rima Alsammarae

Syrbanism is a non-profit initiative that strives to equip all Syrians with knowledge about their rights regarding property and reconstruction efforts, thereby empowering them to be active participants in the future of their home country. Working with other organisations, the EU and think tanks, Syrbanism hopes to disseminate information as widely as possible using many means, from workshops and conferences to viral Facebook videos. Here, the founders share the importance of their mission, and the impact Syrbanism has had in the past three years.



All images courtesy of Syrbanism

Since its establishment in 2017, Syrbanism has worked to provide accurate, timely and accessible information on the latest urban reconstruction policies in Syria with the intention of advancing and bolstering the participation of Syrian citizens in the rebuilding of their country – whether they're inside Syria, or elsewhere in the world.

Founded by Syrian urbanists and researchers Edwar Hanna (based in Austria) and Nour Harastani (based in Germany), Syrbanism has collaborated with many organisations to conduct workshops and conferences, as well as cooperated with think-tanks and initiatives. In 2019, it focused on research and advocacy, producing work with Fridreich Ebert Stiftung entitled *Documentation of Syrian Ownership Rights*, as well as conferences and policy analysis. By the end of 2020, Syrbanism will have been featured in the EU conference on Syria as best practice for organisations focusing on housing, land and property rights.

Officially registered as a non-profit that disseminates information mostly through video and online platforms, Syrbanism is developing strategic partnerships with academic institutions, NGOs and UN agencies for the promotion of public participation and recovery. The aim? To develop long-term strategies regarding urban archiving and the protection of property rights of vulnerable people.

Here, Hanna and Harastani discuss the importance of Syrbanism and the need for more sustainable, peace-building processes in post-conflict contexts.

“Syrbanism adopts a clear and straightforward way through the use of visual materials and infographics.”

Why do you think an initiative like Syrbanism is necessary for countries that are in a similar situation to Syria?

In war-stricken contexts, access to accurate information is difficult. Moreover, displacement and loss of property documents increases the demand for trusted information and know-how procedures in order to protect property rights and the related documents. Initiatives in areas of war contribute to citizen knowledge as an essential element in advocating for appropriate urban policies. It is important to know what the facts on the ground are, what policies have been advanced and trailed, what the debates regarding options are, and what international best practice in the area of post-conflict urban reconstruction is.

Initiatives like Syrbanism are needed in similar contexts so as to facilitate inclusive and digestible processes for everyone, empowering people to protect their property documents in the short term and participate in designing their cities in the long term.

How do you feel Syrbanism contributes to Syria's urban reconstruction?

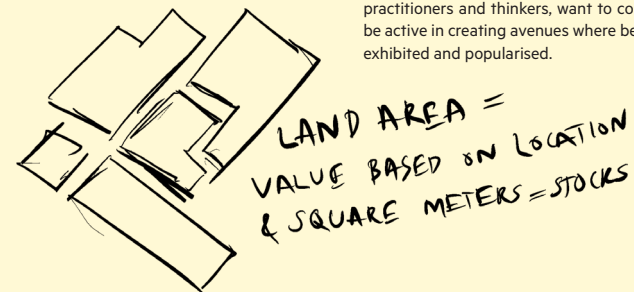
Syrbanism has successfully started the conversation around urban rights in Syria in the general public sphere by using accessible language and terminology. It has presented the facts about certain laws and policies that affect people's rights, such as Law 10, Decree 66 and others. Syrbanism adopts a clear and straightforward way through the use of visual materials and infographics. These materials explain in detail the procedures and options citizens need to be informed on for their property rights and are designed to provide information and be for use by all Syrians.

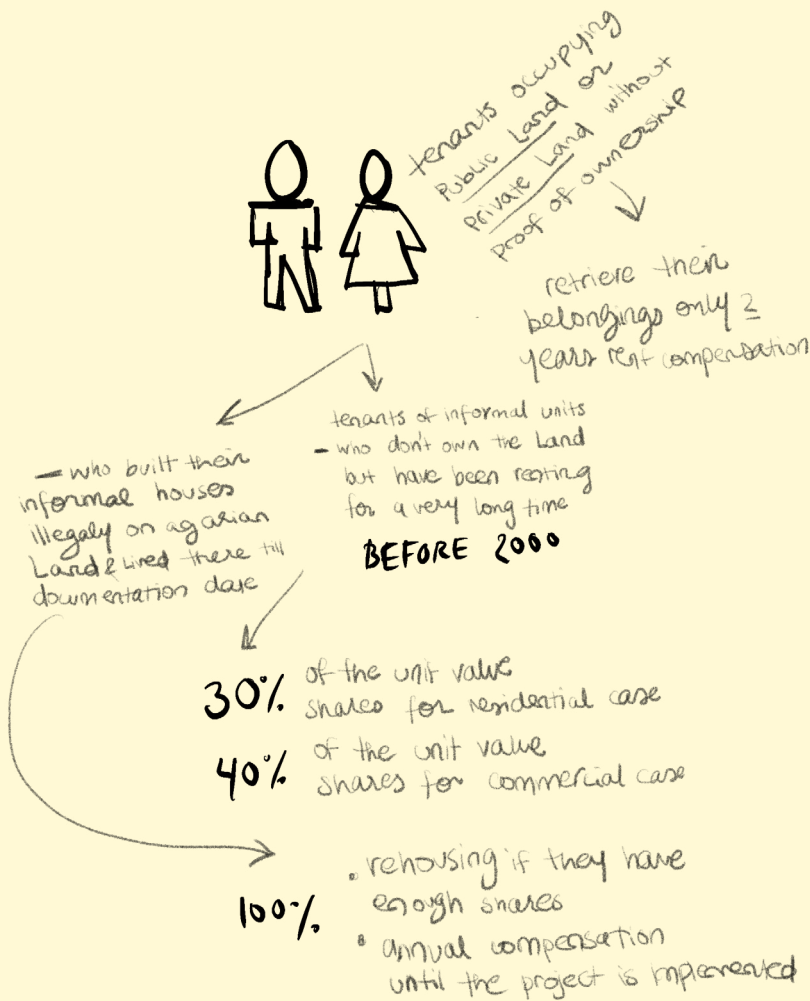
These materials have been shared not only by refugees and opponents, but also by supporters of the government, because laws are about potentially unworkable and damaging legal processes that are not just untenable on many local levels, but also detrimental to most ordinary people. It is hoped that by all parties understanding the negative impacts of such policies, they can be reconsidered.

Are there any particular cities that you have a special focus on at the moment?

A long term objective of ours is to showcase architectural and urban development alternatives in the most affected cities such as Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, Damascus (and its suburbs), and Rakka. At the moment, there is general anxiety about proposed reconstruction, Law 10 and potential urban (re)development; however, there is not yet an avenue for responding with solutions. If reconstruction is left to contractors who have relationships with the government or related officials, and where capital accumulation is the primary driver, there would be a greater likelihood of continued crisis, displacement and lack of reconciliation.

However, if there are highlighted initiatives for proposing better solutions, better urban planning and better design even within the existing legal framework, this can go a long way to improving the situation. We, as facilitators of a community of urban practitioners and thinkers, want to contribute to the development alternatives and be active in creating avenues where better urban solutions can be created, analysed, exhibited and popularised.





How do you feel that Syrbanism has helped the general public understand the current situation in Syria and their rights regarding reconstruction?

Syrbanism has taken the lead in informing a range of EU media, researchers and institutions on how better to support refugees and internally displaced people in protecting their property rights, regardless of their ownership status. Syrbanism has conducted online campaigns to advocate the securing of property rights of vulnerable people that are affected by the latest policies, such as Law 10 and Decree 66. These campaigns include one for refugees who fled the country and either lost their ownership documents or they don't have access to the embassies to certify the needed proof. They are vulnerable to losing their rights since Law 10 seizes properties from those who are unable to prove their rights within a period of time. Another campaign addressed Decree 66 and was for the informal residents of Damascus, who didn't receive equitable compensation and rehousing.

We aim to continue our awareness-raising work by reaching out to more Syria-related organisations to boulder mobilisation and impact advocacy within the EU. Syrbanism believes that any reconstruction agenda, besides being negotiable and accountable, should also consider the rebuilding of 'lives' rather than just 'houses'. Otherwise, Syria's conflict will transform into a more complex and longer one.

What is Syrbanism working on at the moment?

There is a lack of opportunities and venues for cooperative knowledge sharing about Syrian urban justice issues, particularly among young Syrian urbanists. We believe such a network is needed in order to link people and institutions who are engaged in urban issues from different perspectives, disciplines, professionals and locations. We are working on establishing the first ever network of Young Syrian Urbanists (YSU) to support knowledge sharing through interaction, discussion and collaboration around Syria's urban reconstruction discourses. This multidisciplinary, robust, peer network will include Syrian architects, urban planners, designers, engineers, anthropologists, archaeologists, as well as landscape experts from across the world.

DOCUMENTATION OF PROPERTY:

- ① CERTIFICATE OF TITLE — GREEN TAPU
- ② COURT ORDER — HIKEM MAHKAMA
- ③ NON-CANCELLABLE NOTARIZED MANDATE — WKALET KATEB ADEL
- ④ CO-OWNERSHIP

“We, as facilitators of a community of urban practitioners and thinkers, want to contribute to development alternatives and be active in creating avenues where better urban solutions can be created, analysed, exhibited and popularised.”

Urban Canvas

Location: Khartoum, Sudan Author: Ola Diab

In Sudan, decades of economic and political strife that marked the latter half of the 20th century, meant a lack of the necessary urban planning and regeneration of decaying areas. Today, one year on from the 2019 revolution, the country's streets and buildings have been given a make-over, courtesy of Sudanese street artists.



Artwork by Alaa Satir



Image courtesy of the artist

“In 2012, when I started, I focused on the general infrastructure and public works in Sudan. And I realised that the country is very underdeveloped. It’s just beyond the state of deterioration – you find people living in good homes, but the streets and the street walls are in terrible conditions... We need colour. We need to beautify our walls.”

In December of 2018, a series of anti-government protests broke out across Sudan, leading to the ousting of former president Omar Al Bashir by April 2019 and the appointment of a transitional military-civilian Sovereign Council led by prime minister Abdalla Hamdok, which came into power that following August. As the nine-month political revolution took form, a parallel movement in street art was born, and today, one year on, reminders of the revolution colour the built fabric of the country. The walls that frame Sudan's streets remain painted with words and portraits that tell tales of the revolution, blending urban art with the country's spatial forms.

Sudan's architecture is diverse. The country was home to several civilisations, like the Kingdom of Kush, Kerma, Nobatia, Meroë and others, which flourished along the Nile, leaving behind their traces in mud structures sourced from the banks of the river. The country's built environment also features Islamic and colonial architecture, introduced during centuries of foreign rule and influence. Many of these structures remain today, with examples including the University of Khartoum and the old Presidential Palace.

Following Sudan's independence from the British in 1956, modern architecture emerged with regional expression, reflecting the country's culture, climate and resources. But by the 1990s, Sudan witnessed a range of contemporary international architectural styles that dramatically changed the urban landscape of its cities, particularly Khartoum. The new architecture was excessively applied, and used unfamiliar building material for its construction.

Urban development in Khartoum is defined by different types of irregular settlements – or what Khalafalla Omer calls a “manifestation of inappropriate planning policies that lead to chaotic urban forms” in his piece *Khartoum: Urban Chaos and the Reclaiming of City Character*. Because of Sudan's decades-long economic and political instability, the country lacked the necessary urban planning for its continued development in the latter half of the 20th century. As Omer put it, “[Khartoum] features many poor urban structures, which harm the appearance of the city,” and this can be said for most of Sudan's cities.

As a result, street art in Sudan has been the country's latest, community-driven endeavour to beautify the urban environment, and its creators are responsible for enhancing the urban environment across its cities.



Artwork by Alaa Satir

Throughout the revolution, the artistic movement that arose transformed the dust-filled, cracked mud and concrete walls of Sudan's buildings with remarkable murals, most of which script popular slogans used during the uprising and depict Sudanese life pre- and post-revolution. A good amount of the street art seen in and outside of Khartoum was created especially during a months-long, mass sit-in, known as Al Qeyada, which took place in front of the headquarters of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).

Although the sit-in was brutally dispersed in June 2019, markers of its significance, and the artistic consciousness brought to life with it, blanket the walls that surround the area.

"People were confined by the walls," said graffiti artist Assil Diab. "Beyond them were the streets, the Rapid Security Forces, and the government – in other words, the war was behind them. But on the other side, there was unity, peace and people beautifying the area, and not only by painting the walls, but also by spreading positivity."

Diab has been painting on Sudan's streets and public spaces since 2012, but during the revolution, she began a series titled *Martyrs Graffiti*, which immortalises the young men who lost their lives at the hands of the former regime. "The art movement was part of the peaceful revolution," she said. "It was our weapon as artists, musicians and poets to fight against the system."

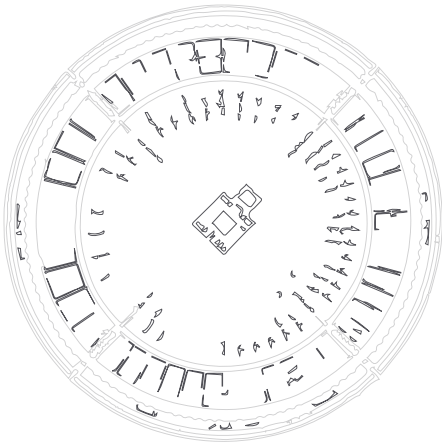
Echoing Diab's sentiment, artist Alaa Satir added that when Al Qeyada took place, the artistic voice of the city grew louder, with big murals of bold messaging splashing across Sudan. "Art was a way to add pressure and keep the momentum going," she said. "It was, without a doubt, one of our biggest weapons for civil disobedience."

Street art found its canvas on the walls of both private and public structures. Sudan's semi-open homes and institutions are enveloped by large walls that ensure the privacy of the users inside. These walls became the most prominent public platform for the artists' expressions.

"In 2012, when I started, I focused on the general infrastructure and public works in Sudan," said Diab. "And I realised that the country is very underdeveloped. It's just beyond the state of deterioration – you find people living in good homes, but the streets and the street walls are in terrible conditions. Sudan is a very big, empty canvas, and there are a lot of walls and spaces. We need colour; we need to beautify the walls. And as a country with different groups, cultures and religions, we have a lot to say and a lot of stories to tell."

"Street art helped the streets of Sudan come to life," added Satir, who dedicated her revolution-inspired artwork to giving women a voice and depicting their place in the demonstrations. "It was a reminder of the amount of talent we have in Sudan, and the amount of stories we have to tell. It only made sense that art becomes a part of the streets as well – making them a place where people want to be, and where our history is proudly displayed."

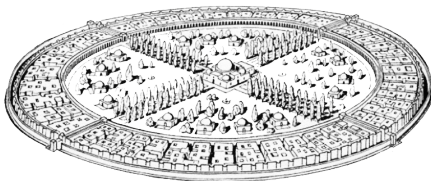
"Art was a way to add pressure and keep the momentum going."



Madinat as-Salam

Location: Baghdad, Iraq **Author:** Rima Alsammarae

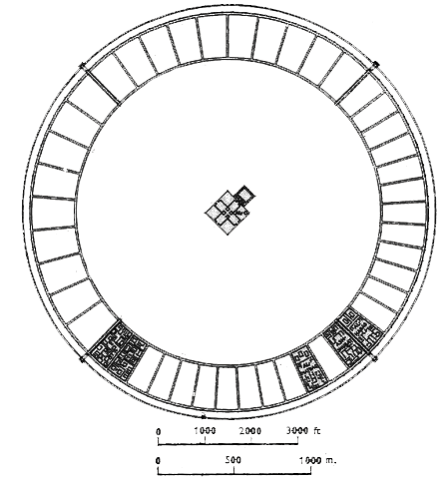
Conceived in 762, Al-Mansur's 'Round City' was an incredible example of early urban design, setting the stage for the Islamic Empire's golden era. While today, Baghdad has undoubtedly grown beyond the double-ring masterplan, its original layout was then the region's largest construction project, providing a throne from which the Abbasid dynasty reigned.



As the story goes, Al-Mansur "The Victorious", despite being the second caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, carried the burden of establishing the Abbasid caliphate. Following his brothers' successive deaths and the official collapse of the Umayyads, the keen military strategist immediately sought to establish a capital, and surveyed the lands himself. Al-Mansur pursued a site that was distant enough from the Greek frontier and close enough to Persia, which provided much of his military power, where he and his heirs could reign over the growing Islamic world. Sailing along the Tigris River, from Jarjara to Mosul, he arrived at what would become Baghdad in 762.

Although there are multiple suggestions that indicate communities existed here well before Al-Mansur's exploration, his founding and planning of Baghdad is considered, along with his military victories, among his greatest achievements and an early example of urban planning. Upon arriving, he had the plans for his Round City drawn out. There are various theories as to why Al-Mansur chose a circular plan, but many agree it was a tribute to the geometric teachings of Euclid, whom Al-Mansur had studied and respected. The original plans had been traced out on the ground in lines of cinders, and once Al-Mansur approved the Round City's design, balls of cotton were lit on fire, permanently marking the position of the outer walls.

Round City had a circumference of four miles and featured four gates that marked the outer walls, and from each, a straight road led to the centre of the city. The southern gates – all four were named after the cities which they pointed towards – were integral to a network of waterways that channeled the waters of the Euphrates into the Tigris, while the northern gates were directed towards Syria and Khorasan (greater Iran). Round City's four main roads that ran towards the centre were lined with vaulted arcades, which housed shops and spaces for street vendors, and small off-shoots led to public squares, houses and commercial buildings. According to illustrations, homes and commercial buildings were constructed closely to one another, likely benefiting from shade cast by neighbouring structures, and wind currents drafted in the small alleyways.



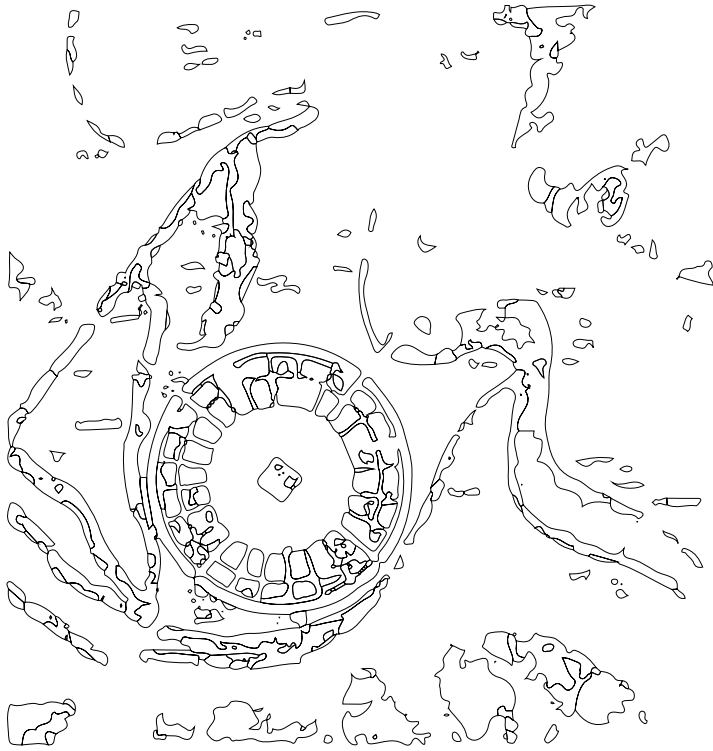
Drawing nearer to the centre, an inner wall (estimated to be 6,500 feet in diameter) and a second set of gates contained the central zone. Here were the palaces of the caliph's children, homes for royal staff, barracks, armoury, and a department for land tax, while at the very core sat the Great Mosque (Baghdad's first mosque) and the caliph's Golden Gate Palace. As Justin Marozzi notes in his book *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, Round City, therefore, contained a layout that was easily navigable, and which operated via a hierarchy of districts.

Each wall boasted 162,000 bricks for the first third of its height, 150,000 for the second third, and 140,000 for the final third. According to the writings of Al Khatib al-Baghdadi, a Muslim scholar from the 11th century, the outer wall reached a height of 24 metres, and was topped off with battlements and flanked by bastions. Surrounding the city limits, a moat was constructed to serve as further protection from resistance movements and uprisings.

Al-Mansur wanted Baghdad to be the perfect city, wrote Marozzi; thus, the design and construction of Round City involved thousands of architects, engineers, surveyors, carpenters, blacksmiths and more than a hundred thousand labourers from across the Abbasid empire. Because of the utter workforce involved, it is said to be the largest construction project of the Islamic world.

After consulting with royal astrologers, Al-Mansur laid the first brick on 30 July, 762. Round City was completed four years later in 766, after an estimated four million silver dirham pay-out.

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Round City laid the foundation for the birth of a regional nexus of innovation, enlightenment and cultural awakening.



Al-Mansur's leadership, as well as that of his descendants, is further defined by a period of cultural investment and enlightenment – he bolstered the translation movement, a large, well-funded effort to translate a significant number of secular Greek, Sanskrit, Syriac and Pahlavi texts into Arabic. While Greek to Arabic translations were common during the Umayyad period, the translation of Greek scientific texts, until the mid-eighth century, was rare. Influenced by the Sassanian ideology (which itself was influenced by Greek thought), Round City was inherently receptive to and actively sought the knowledge prevalent in Greek writing. Thus, as the brick walls rose from the banks of the Tigris River, public consciousness awakened and expanded.

Named Madinat as-Salam, or City of Peace, by Al-Mansour, Round City drew a diverse mix of religious scholars, astronomers, poets, architects, mathematicians, musicians, philosophers and historians, which eventually lent to its far-reaching reputation as a multicultural centre and caused incredible numbers of people to move here from Khorasan, Yemen, Hijaz, Wasit, Kufa and the rest of the Muslim world.

Within 12 years of Round City's completion, the population of Baghdad burst. Al-Mansur had already established his son's throne across the river in Al Rusafa to accommodate Baghdad's growth and fortify Al-Mahdi's inheritance of the Abbasid dynasty. Between the two, mosques, palaces, gardens, public baths and bridges multiplied and spread.

While Baghdad did not stay the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate (as it was transferred to Samarra for a short time in 836), the Round City laid the foundation for the birth of a regional nexus of innovation, enlightenment and cultural awakening. Its well-chosen location allowed it to benefit from both the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, while its urban plan allowed for security and protection from resistance movements. And though its spatial restraint exposed itself within a year, Al-Mansur acted swiftly, accommodating population growths with measured construction booms.

Remnants of the Round City no longer remain. While the city that Al-Mansur built continued to be inhabited for the centuries that followed, Baghdad fell and rose time and time again. After passing through the hands of the Mongols and the Mamluks, the city's final traces were razed by Midhat Pasha, a reformist Ottoman governor in the 1870s. Regardless, Round City defined Baghdad, and was its original plan. While organic growth informed the city's expansion, Al-Mansur's dream set the precedent for the future of the capital of Iraq, which has repeatedly displayed its ability to thrive at different points in history.

Its well-chosen location allowed it to benefit from both the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, while its urban plan allowed for security and protection from resistance movements.

In the Wake of Recovery

Author: Kourosh Salehi

Large dense and sprawling cities are part of an inescapable global reality. Their advantages have long been praised ever since the Modernists argued for “town as a machine for movement”, but what of their disadvantages? If regulations have shaped the affluent cities in the advanced economies, what of the unregulated or under regulated cities across the world?



Image of flooding in Manila, Creative Commons

Amongst the noise and disruption to our daily routines, as we embark on another week of self-isolation and working from home, if not much else, we are given the opportunity to reflect on the condition and impact of the current predicament that we all face, and indicate where we are heading.

Since the earliest human habitation, protection has been the primary incentive to devise means, materials and methods to construct a safer living environment. Weather conditions, fear of enemy attacks, diseases and natural disasters are reasons to regulate to achieve safer standards. Calamities like wars, major fires and illnesses have greatly contributed to the way cities have been shaped and structured.

Laws are often a response to fear: the apocalyptic predictions of what could happen. Fire, theft, vandalism and the need for protection. It is little surprising therefore that cities have tried to protect themselves through guidelines. Urban regulations are often the consequences of major disasters like earthquakes, plagues, floods, to name a few: disasters, or more accurately the fear of them, shape our cities.



Image of Aleppo, Creative Commons

One of the issues highlighted by the recent Covid-19 epidemic is human proximity and the need to manage it to prevent spreading the virus. ‘Social distancing’ is a coined phrase heard regularly in common conversations; however, given that over 54 percent of us live and work in dense cities or in various kinds of social forms, outside the immediate family environment, how can it coexist with the age old hypothesis that denser cities are more efficient machines which capitalise on shared services and resources?

Many urbanists have long argued that dense urban centres are more efficient in their functionality and land usage: densification, or building a city inwardly, offers an approach to housing demands, and reduces the tendency for cities to spread out and claim precious land. In public discourse, densification is offered as the only alternative to ever-expanding suburbs, for ecological and social sustainability, sharing of main health, leisure and other socially interactive facilities.

However, the growth of the new cities which lack standards and control also creates potential risks and challenges in view of emerging infectious diseases. Large urban ecosystems can be adversely affected by poor housing, bad water supplies and inadequate infrastructures. These will in turn lead to the spread of insect and rodent-borne illnesses.

Urban regulations are often the consequences of major disasters like earthquakes, plagues, floods, to name a few: disasters, or more accurately the fear of them, shape our cities.

Today many commentators consider the Great Fire of London of 1666 as the source of the 'development control' measures in the highly regulated City of London, as well as city planning as we know it, but what of those urban centres across the world that are not adequately regulated or simply lack the means to apply them? The slums that, due to abject poverty, cannot even be documented or accounted for? The warzones, the permanent refugee camps... What is good urban planning to them?

Over a billion of the world's inhabitants live in informal settlements and slums that are unregulated and constitute an unhealthy living and working environment. This is largely due to failures of governance and apathy by the rest of the societies they inhabit.

Utopian ideals can form a basis for theoretical debate, but the reality of slum dwellers across the globe project a different and somewhat more tangible actuality, particularly in the face of natural or man-made catastrophes.

Cities remain at the forefront of conflicts and disasters, and their form and content, which is the communities that they house, change significantly as a result. Once cities are physically demolished, like in conflicts, as is the case with the on-going war in Syria, the actual costs go far beyond the affected region and their inhabitants. Apart from the immediate human cost, the breakdown of law, order, and the infrastructures of power and commerce will have repercussions far beyond the borders of the affected area.

Much has been said about the need for a sustainable approach to development in the last few decades, largely due to a severe reduction in natural resources, but socioeconomic sustainability, which argues for a better distribution of the earth's resources, often is undermined in commercially led ventures. It seems affordability of the swanky new apartment in far too many parts of the world, also gets the bidder a greater access to open spaces, safer conditions as well as better facilities.

What COVID-19 has demonstrated is that we are interconnected more than ever, and that diseases and disasters do not discriminate between haves and have nots.



Image courtesy of Getty Images

Clean, safe and livable places should form the basis of a basic living condition. What Covid-19 has demonstrated is that we are interconnected more than ever, and that diseases and disasters do not discriminate between haves and have nots. The planet is linked through many strands of connectivity and one affected part could infect and compromise everyone.

One of the outcomes of this recent outbreak of panic and despair is the slowdown of our pace of life and the reflection many seem to be doing as they reassess what is being done in the name of progress.

The speed of travel and global exchanges of goods, data, politics and commerce is presented as the inevitable path to progress: the unstoppable ocean liner of growth, the charging wilder beasts of development. The must-consume, must-produce, must-spend, must-run, must-run-faster, must-not-look, must-not-blink, must-jump, must-jump-higher of commerce, broken politics, corrupt power and insatiable egos, is taken as an unavoidable norm. The mundanity of celebrity culture, the meaningless chatter and the mind numbingly vacuous broth of the zillion TV channels presented as popular entertainment... Now possibly is the time for a little deliberation, a small pause perhaps to ponder and query if this is truly progress.

Architecture and urban design, like most forms of the arts, is the representation of hope: the wish for a better more valid alternative proposal. Whether like other major disasters, Covid-19 will leave an enduring mark on urban standards or not, it has already highlighted the urgency of real action.

As urbanists we can appeal for a wider dialogue about how global cities are perceived, sustained and regulated. We need to participate in a greater debate and help to redefine the possible. The future of our communities depends on it.

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