URBAN MINDS. DESIGN NEW FORMS OF LIVING, NOT NEW FORMS OF CITY.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF A RISING URBAN POPULATION WITH A DIMINISHING STOCK OF GLOBAL RESOURCES IS A GREAT CHALLENGE, BUT NOT AN IMPOSSIBILITY. THE BIG QUESTION IS NOT HOW ONE CITY CAN PROVIDE FOR ITSELF, BUT HOW A GLOBAL NETWORK OF CITIES AND THE NETWORK OF PRODUCTIVE LANDSCAPES IN BETWEEN CAN PROVIDE FOR EACH OTHER. WE NEED TO REACH A NEW SYSTEM AND A NEW AGENDA FOR RESOURCE TRADING WHICH IS BOTH LOCAL AND GLOBAL.

BY DOMINIC BALMFORTH, SUSTURB / HOUSE OF FUTURES

3.5 billion people live in cities today and the numbers are rising. Urban population is the dominant portion, both in terms of number and impact. That is why we need to design new forms of living.

First, we can start to address big cities as systems which we can change and not only systems which are self-generating. Second, we can make serious changes in the way we currently conceive and manage urban density, urban organization and urban culture. We need more people living in less space than before, we need a new system to govern a more effective flow of all resources and we need the mass of human will to be part of 'system-us' instead of a 'system-me-and-mine'. To do this, we must regain our lost confidence in making radical but realistic visions of how our future cities can work. As Lord Anthony Giddens suggests, we can make 'utopian realities'.

JUST ADD PEOPLE

We are making some attempts to prototype what future cities could look like, but these often exclude the primary driving force to sustain urban life; people. We are only making proposals for density without inspiring new human activity. We are drawing up fancy new structures to house more of the same. These are the images, visions, and I would argue, illusions of urban (and sometimes so-called eco-) utopias. Examples are Dongtan eco-city in China, Masdar in Abu Dhabi and Seasteads proposed for oceans across the globe. Engineers are piecing together the nuts and bolts of these new places and architects are making them look good.

These are technological and visual images of the future, and they are designing a new form of city, but then import an old (and outmoded) form of urban life. We are not invited to create and define these places via a different, innovative way of life. We are simply invited to move in and live with the finished product once it is complete. This is not to say that these cities won't turn out to be examples of sustainable cities, but if they do, this will be the result of a new form of urban living progressively changing the city's form and not the opposite.

Other issues of the eco-city are those of re-location and autonomy. Why aren't eco-city schemes embedded within existing cities? Surely the challenge is not to create new green enclaves removed from the existing city or the rest of the world, but to rethink the urban world we already have and, in particular, rethink the relationship and interdependency between the urban and the rural. Even if the eco-city manages to be completely off-grid and autonomous with regard to energy provision and internal mobility, will it ever really be self-sufficient with regards to food, clean water, household products or clothing brands? Will there be new laws to forbid the exchange of resources across city boundaries?

A NEW URBAN CULTURE

Creating mini-parallel worlds shut off from one other doesn't help the wider context, on the contrary it undermines the wider context by saying, "if we can't fix here, we relocate somewhere else". The big question is not how one city can provide for itself, but how a global network of cities and the network of productive landscapes in between can provide for each other. We need to reach a new system and a new agenda for resource trading which is both local and global at the same time.

For now, the Masdar and Dongtan models can most usefully serve as showcases for how far we have come with innovating production. Focus areas for this innovation are energy and mobility. These places can both house new technologies and synergize these new technologies. In doing so, they can show how less (non-renewable) energy and smarter mobility can provide for more. They begin to propose adequate solutions for density, make an attempt on

At the third In100Y-seminar in November 2011 the 'Urban Minds' workshop, introduced by architect Dominic Balmforth, had to name up to 3 new initiatives/projects that are advancing the sustainability agenda of urban minds in important ways applying science and technology. Here is the list the participants came up with: Bornholm Congress Center (DK), Political "technology", bike-train-bike (btb), urban farming, new technologies for self-sustaining cities, public initiative (light rail in Aarhus), Totnes Transition Town, 'Distortion Copenhagen' (social technology), Industrial Symbiosis – waste management (Kalundborg, DK), building regulation (in 2020 all buildings has to be energy+, Carbon Pricing (private people can sell c-waste), Public Purchase should be sustainable. Pictures: Dominic Balmforth and Flemming Wisler (to the left), Erik Hagelskjær (in the middle) and Christian Ege, Karen Blincoe and Ulf Boström (to the rigth).

infrastructure and organization, but are still far away from rethinking mass human culture. They innovate how we can produce and fit together, but not how we use or consume. To paraphrase Lord Anthony Giddens, speaking at the World Climate Solutions Conference 2010: "We need to innovate, not only production but also consumption."

This supports a move towards a new urban culture in which today's pattern of consumption is completely redefined. This is not only about cutting back on what we consume, but rather changing how we consume. Recycling is our current answer to reprocessing waste (and even the recycling industry is vastly underdeveloped). But when we realize that consumption and use are two different things, we will stop making waste out of products and components that can instead be re-circulated and used again many times over.

In an intelligent future, there is no such thing as waste. Since resources are scarce, our currency of the future is our material. This makes major business sense, when we learn to buy and sell the use of the same products many times over, instead of buying, owning and wasting many products (read the article 'Release our resources, make more use' on p. 36). We can gradually mobilize the global consumer into releasing all the material which they have bought and used. This material can never be allowed to become waste. Organic material such as surplus foods can be redirected to feed agriculture, pharmaceutical and bio-energy industries with vital biological nutrients. Man-made material such as plastics and metals can be redirected back to the product development industries which rely on them as source material.

LET US …

So, let's stop talking about how to decrease human impact on nature and start to support innovation which increases the positive impact on both nature and our own anthrosphere. The place to start this innovation is in our cities since these are where we are most and where we are closest together. Let us make cities the hub of innovation. Let us design in the present urban context instead of constructing new ones. Let us stop only designing new forms of city and start designing new forms of urban living.

Dominic Balmforth, architect and partner in House of Futures. He is also director in Susturb ApS. Contact Dominic via mail dominic@houseoffutures.dk or mobile +45 6130 6974.

NOTES: The economist and sociologist, Lord Anthony Giddens speaking at the World Climate Solutions Conference 2010 in Copenhagen, Denmark. *Dongtan City* plan by British engineers, Arup is a plan for a new eco-city on the island of Chongming in Shanghai, China. *Masdar* in Abu Dhabi is a new city designed by Foster and Partners and claims to be a zero carbon and zero waste city. *Seasteads* are communities or entire cities on the ocean built on ships, floating platforms or piled and fixed platforms similar to oil rigs. See The Seasteading Institute on http://seasteading.org/ and the Ecomonist, December 2011 under section; Technology Quarterly.