Cities Create Their Futures

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"Cities to play a major role in global governance, in a reformed United Nations"

"Digitalization, aging, globalization, global warming, new viruses, as well as expanded expectations, all point to dramatic changes in the nature of Mayoral Responsibilities"

"Nothing will change in my role as Mayor in twenty years - just more of the same."

These were some of the perspectives articulated by 99 Mayors from around the Asia-Pacific Region at the October 21-22 Asia-Pacific Cities Summit 2003. Held in Brisbane, Queensland, Mayors and civic leaders embarked on a foresight process to anticipate future problems, develop scenarios of the future city, and articulate a preferred vision of the future of the city.

Along with plenary sessions with world renowned speakers such as green architect Ken Yeang, Time Magazine hero of the planet Vandana Shiva, "Alternative Nobel" Right Livelihood winner Johan Galtung, Feminist Futurist Ivana Milojevic, City Planner Steven Ames, Chairman of the Future 500 and former CEO of Mitsubishi Electric America Takashi Tachi, mayors met in a series of sessions to chart out the direction of the future city. The sessions were facilitated by political scientist and professor of futures studies and social sciences, Sohail Inayatullah.

Familiar Ground

The first session was familiar ground for Mayors as they identified current issues (solving problems is why they were elected to their positions in the first place). Some of these issues included population drift (rural to city, small to large cities), traffic congestion, growth

occurring faster than infrastructure development, lack of partnership between city and business, loss of cultural heritage, long term water supply, lack of skills of the workforce, lack of support of central government to local government and lack of employment opportunities. The main overall categories of current problems were: sustainability and the challenges of increased growth; Infrastructure decline and affordability; Governance, Environmental Protection and resource scarcity, and Community Capacity.

Mayors, of course, spoke from their personal experiences. Taipei Deputy Mayor Chin-Der Ou challenged Mayors to think not only of Sars but of future viruses. Mayors from Fijian cities (Gani from Nadi, Simmons from Labasa, Goundar from Lautoka) spoke of the challenges of a central government that was not sympathetic to local issues. Mayor Sirajuddin of Ipoh commented that globalization - in the form of increased travel and heightened information - had raised the expectation of Ipoh citizens. They expected Ipoh to have the same levels of "development" (services, for example) as an American or European city, New York or London, for example .

From current issues, Mayors moved to identifying future problems. To do so, Mayors were asked to identify drivers that were pushing us into the future. The drivers selected included the usual suspects: Population growth, Economic and Cultural Globalization, and Environmental changes.

Based on these drivers, Mayors then focused on emerging issues. The purpose of this was so that they could better anticipate the future and thus better meet the changing needs of citizens (and new stakeholders — global corporations, global nongovernmental organization, global institutions). These issues included what

could go wrong but also opportunities for greater prosperity and democratization.

Along with the expected issue of the increased income gap between the haves and have nots being created by globalization, Mayors saw that the future would make their roles more complex. They would have to address issues such as the ethics associated with medical and technological advancements, e-governance, as well the broader issue of the role of the civic leader in a digitalized e-city. And along with a squeeze from the Central government – in terms of less funds but more responsibilities – Mayors would be caught in a squeeze from nature, with extensive competition for water and other natural resources. Aging as well would change the nature of the city, leading some cities to be increasingly dysfunctional and others far becoming retirement centers. Along with the demographic shift of aging, immigration, especially the new wave of of global knowledge workers (and refugees) would change the face of the city.

But through all the changes, the Mayors were clear that their role would be to ensure that communities stayed connected. It was creating strong and healthy communities that was central, focusing on relationship building. This was a central made by Caboolture, Mayor Joy Leishman. Without a leadership role – developing a vision of the future and creating structures and processes that could deliver that the future – cities would find themselves swamped by a rapidly transforming global, regional and local worlds.

Scenarios

From these issues, four scenarios emerged.

The first was a warning of what could go wrong if technocratism overwhelmed governance. This was *High-Tech Anomie*, with technologization leading not to greater community building but to further alienation. In this future, the internet would become a site of fragmentation and crime, drug shopping, for example. Improvements in genetics would only benefit the rich, creating cities divided by class.

The second was a future where Mayors were unable to meet the *changing expectations* of citizens. Democratization, globalization, a highly educated, technology savvy population demanding instant response from cities would lead to a condition of permanent crisis. Leadership would succumb to these pressures and citizens would resort to undemocratic expressions to get their needs met.

The third future was one where Mayors spent most of their time and resources on *disaster management*. Whether it was SARS (and future diseases from genetic errors) or HIV or the global water crisis, cities should expect a difficult and bleak future, where survival was of primary importance.

The fourth future was far more hopeful. Mayors argued that with a highly educated and informed populace, their jobs would become that of the facilitator. Their role would be focused on the capacity building of city employees and citizens. *Creating learning organizations and communities* would become the vehicle wherein citizens took far more responsibility of the future of their city. Part of being a learning community was to embed in the city, processes of conflict resolution – mediation and arbitration - within their communities, so that the rights of individuals and groups and the pressure of social advancement could be negotiated.

The first three scenarios required leadership to ensure that the trends were managed or that they did not occur while the last was focused on what could be done to anticipate and accommodate any future.

Fishbowl scenarios

The next session was a plenary fishbowl wherein these scenarios were tested. Along with speakers Johan Galtung, Vandana Shiva, and Tachi Kiuchi, were Mayors Tim Quinn of Brisbane, Mayor Sirajuddin Ipoh, Mayor Ho Pin Teo of Singapore, and of Mayor Robert Bell of Gosford. In an interactive session, led by Inayatullah, these futures were refined.

Galtung evoked the rainforest to imagine the future of the city. As Ken Yeang had argued

earlier, the built environment should be, and could be, integrated into the natural environment. Not only would cost savings results – energy bills, health costs, – but the beauty of the city would be restored.[1] Green could become gold. Vandana Shiva reminded participants that for cities to create the futures they wanted they had to challenge the strategies and tactics of large private corporations, particularly in the areas of water management.[2] Water, she asserted, must remain a public resource, and as much as possible, cities needed to ensure that globalization did not erode democratic decision-making processes. Takashi Kiuchi as well focused on the Rainforest as the guiding image of the future. City design and planning had to be based on different principles – cooperative evolution between nature and city, technology and community, for example. Mayor Teo brought out practical examples of how Singapore was becoming more green and healthy while retaining its business focus.

However, not all in the audience were impressed. The city as international, prosperous, focused on economic development, attracting large projects (theme parks, for example), that this the Big International City outlook was brought up a counter image – indeed, as the only realistic future. The Mayor of Cairns, Kevin Bryne, in particular argued that the Rainforest as guiding metaphor for the city was inappropriate. Mayor Hong Ju Wang of Congquing as well saw prosperity and internationalization as primary.

However, fish bowl participants saw that the Big City scenario as only a continuation of the present. Current trends would lead to expected outcomes. 1. A divided city, with a number of fault lines: between (A) the winners and losers of globalization, (B) the young and old, (C) local residents and new migrants, and (D) the on-line and the off-line. 2. Urban sprawl would exacerbate loss of green areas, destroy livable communities by continuing the car-highway-oil paradigm of the future. 3. As well, in the current model, pollution, traffic jams would just worsen, building more would only lead to more buildings, and not only increased costs (The World Bank estimates that the cost to the world

is $500[3] billion a year which is lost on deaths and injuries plus congestion, sprawl, noise loss of forests and farms, and carbon emissions)[4] but cities would miss the financial, social and cultural benefits of creating green and healthy cities. 4. Furthermore, the current model would reduce democratization, reduce the capacity of local people to save community and public spaces and make decisions as to their own futures. 5. Finally the Big city model was being discarded by most Western cities, as they searched for new visions to lead them forward. Copying a used-future was unlikely to lead to prosperity, rather the same old mistakes would be committed again.[5]

The debate was not resolved, however, with some considering these costs as externalities, part of the price for progress.

What is clear that the future should not be seen in simplistic terms. Rather, creating a clean, healthy, urban village, public and community space focused city, where people (social, environmental, and cultural capital was foundational) were the true landmarks, and not the tallest buildings, would lead to increased prosperity for all. It was not the single bottom line of the developer or the radical green activist that was being called for but the triple bottom line of prosperity, social justice and environmentalism.

Not polluting – and ensuring that this did not happen via persuasion, fines and incentives – would enhance the desirability of the city. Traditional notions of desirability were about size, grandness – the modern city – however, new notions are focused on individual health, community capacity building, well being and quality of life. Case studies on the steps required to realize this future were presented by Prasit Pongbhast, the Deputy-Director General of Policy and Planning for Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (the healthy cities project) and by Deputy Mayor Chin-Der Oh of Taipei (the cities acclaimed recycling project).

Vision

The final session was focused on the preferred future. What type of city did Mayors

desire? And how could cities work together to create a shared future? As expected there was not full agreement. Representatives were from a variety of cities, some with populations in the millions, others in the thousands, some the economic size of nations, others without a true middle class, however, general points were agreed upon.

1. The city needs to be clean and green.

2. The city must focus on creativity and innovation, instead of traditional models and knowledge structures. This was the best way to become prosperous.

3. The city must be an inclusive place of opportunity, offering equity of access to citizens.

4. The city must balance the immediacy of growth with protection of the environment, of people's culture and traditions in the wake of globalisation.

5. The city of the future needs to be a city where opportunities are available to all its citizens, meaningful work, education, empowerment and self worth – that is survival, wellbeing, identity and freedom needs must be met.

6. Cities must remain people friendly – true communities – and ensure that their decisions today did not foreclose the options of future generations.

While there was general agreement, the debate between the large international city and the green clean and healthy image was not resolved.

However, clear steps were formulated so that cities could create their desired futures.

Vision 2020 / Summit City Commitments

A. Enhance city relationship

1. In the short term, foster information sharing between local governments through a range of expanded exchange programs.

2. In the medium term, strengthen the role and outcomes of Sister City relationships, to include technology , resource exchanges and capacity development.

3. In the long run, creating a global associ-

ation of local governments, to move towards cities as central to Global Governance, making the first steps towards a House of Cities.

B. Enhance the green city

4. Focus on environmental education for young people, with a view to protecting the environment of the future.

5. Building consensus between all levels of government on key issues of environmental protection and the health of cities.

C. Enhance capacity

6. Actively engage young people in the Summit process, with delegates bringing one young person from their city to the next meeting, to ensure that their views are heard and acted upon, especially as their experiences are being formed by different drivers for change.

7. Enhance volunteer participation in community capacity building in cities, in particular through local government workforces.

8. Investigate new ways to use technology to encourage participation of all citizens in local government decision making. For example, chat rooms, SMS messaging on the future vision for cities, edemocracy and so on.

D. Ensure Future-Orientation

9. Evaluate these issues on an ongoing basis at future summits, in particular the Summit of 2023, seeing visioning the future as an ongoing process.

10. Continue to measure the performance and outcomes of Asia Pacific Summits, to determine the most viable model for future city interactions.

Finally, a conclusion of the Summit was that a full record of the proceedings of the Summit and the outcomes agreed by Mayors should be placed in a time capsule, to be opened and presented to the Asia Pacific Summit of 2023, to determine progress on the Summit City Vision.

As a city planner of sorts, Lao-Tsu once said: "A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step. "

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Notes

1   Recent studies assert that urban sprawl is
    directly related to obesity. City design thus
    correlated with health indicators. Reid
    Ewing et al, "Relationship between urban
    sprawl and physical activity, obesity and
    morbidity," *The Science of Health Promotion*
    (September/October, Vol 18, No. 1), 2003.
    Given the cirect correlation between obesi-
    ty and a variety of illnesses (heart disease,
    cancer, to begin with) city planners have a
    lot to answer for.

2   Urban sprawl is also directly related to
    water issues. For example, we now know
    that suburban sprawl - strip malls, office
    buildings and other paved areas - have
    worsened the drought covering half the
    United States by blocking billions of gallons
    of rainwater from seeping through the soil
    to replenish ground water.   Tom Dogget,
    "Suburban Sprawl Blocks Water, Worsens
    U.S. Drought," *Science - Reuters*. 28/8/2003

3   *Choosing the Future of Transportation*, Molly
    O'Meara Sheehan (Research Associate,
    Worldwatch Institute), *The Futurist*, 35:4,
    July-Aug 2001, 50-56.

4   More than one million people a year are
    killed on the world's roads, and ten times as
    many become disabled. By 2020, road traf-
    fic injuries will be the third largest cause of
    "disease" in the world, according to a
    research team led by epidemiologist Ian
    Roberts of the London School of Hygiene
    and Tropical Medicine. http://www.
    cochrane.org/cochrane/revabstr/AB003734

5   Exemplary is a recent issue of *Newsweek*
    (October-December 2003). Andres Duany,
    "The Best of the West," 55, argues that "the
    urban landscape is changing fast. But if Asia
    doesn't change course, its cities will be dark
    and dismal." Instead of symbolic power –
    the largest city – it is quality of life that has
    become more important. While hard to
    measure, some questions are key. Writes
    Duany: " Is the city a pleasant place to be? Is

there free time, or is it consumed by com-
muting? Is the air clean? Do people have
enough income to buy good housing or is
tied up in purchasing automobiles, which
are necessary to get around?" Duany offers
the following choices: Asian cities can be
like "Dallas and Los Angeles: stuffed with
high-rises and surrounded by jammed high-
ways, shopping centers that sprawl across
what was once countryside. Or they can be
like Portland or Boston: cities of compact,
mixed-use neighborhood with a variety of
housing: pleasant, walkable streets lined
with shops, and a well-run public transit
system." Of course, the key is not to pur-
chase any used future, but to vision the pre-
ferred future within Asia's own historical
terms and alternative futures.