

# Directors of Urban Change: Mega-Urbanization in Asia

Agenda >  
General

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By Freek Colombijn & Peter Nas

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.

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 from 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

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. <

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The Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur

## Local Land Use Strategies in a Globalizing World

Agenda >  
General

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During the last decade, a number of developing countries have seen both rapid economic growth and even more rapid economic decline, particularly in Southeast Asia, stemming from the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Each country and region has experienced these changes differently, but all have become firmly involved in a wider process of globalization. Accompanying these recent changes have been apparently increasing climatic variability, population growth and movement, land use change, deforestation, and what some have termed 'globalization of poverty'. Other changes include increasing commercialization, trans-border trade, and the creation of new economic, social, and political alignments. These changing conditions come along with strengthened state power in some places leading to increasing constraints on local peoples' livelihoods. Elsewhere weakened state power has resulted in more local autonomy but also more threats from outside in the form of uncontrolled resource exploitation. All of these changes have led to heightened concern over the sustainability of nat-

ural resource use, a central issue of the proposed conference organized by the Institute of Geography at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

Local, rural peoples (whether indigenous or migrant) have had to deal with these changes as the globalization process and its accompanying effects reach into their social and economic lives. Local land use strategies have undergone changes as a result, as people adapt earlier practices to the new circumstances. This might be in terms of shortened fallows in swidden systems, expanded agro-forestry, short-term cash and long-term cash cropping, or expanded irrigation of rice fields. Local peoples are continually constrained in what they can do economically by both their natural and social environments, and the globalization process may affect these constraints through, for example, increasing commercialization of agriculture, land degradation from logging and mining, expanded and shifting opportunities for labour migration, and changing notions of household necessity and luxury. Of particular importance here is the well-documented

'occupational multiplicity', the diverse sources of income in farming households that affect decisions and practices with respect to land and other natural resource use.

In this conference, we aim to examine the interconnectedness of global and national processes of change, and local, rural land use strategies and practices that are affected by these wider processes and that directly shape social and natural environments at the local level. We will provide comparative insights into the ways local peoples have responded to economic growth and decline, and to economic development and crisis in their uses of the land. We will also, through interdisciplinary analysis, seek to establish direct linkages between these responses and environmental change. This then concerns such practices as swidden (or shifting) cultivation, its associated fallow and agro-forestry aspects, use of forest products, intensive farming systems such as irrigated rice, cash cropping of everything from vegetables and cereals to plantation crops and paper pulp, and the relationship between resource use and

off-farm diversification. Critically important to these practices are the social arrangements and institutions that people have devised to manage their relations to the land and its resources as well as their strategies for managing lands under increasing pressure. We are particularly interested in examining how locals have adapted to the shift from the era of rapid development in the 1980s and early 1990s to the economic crisis in 1997, with its continuing ramifications on the environment today. One central goal of this conference is to consider the extent to which locals' management of their natural resources in the face of the changes over the past decade is sustainable. <

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