



# Ecumenopolis in Asia

Picture a grid connecting existing urban centres, avoiding the areas that are considered uninhabitable due to altitude, lack of water, extreme climatic conditions, and some other factors. In his effort to map the future of the city and urbanization, the famous Greek urbanist C.A. Doxiadis, who published the journal *Ekistics*, projected this world city and called it Ecumenopolis (Doxiadis 1972). Then and now many feel horrified by the thought of a completely integrated settlement structure covering the earth's crust with tentacles on all continents. This article introduces this issue's theme 'Mega-Urbanization in Asia'.

## Introduction > General

By Peter J.M. Nas (theme editor)

It is estimated that in 2000 about 50 per cent of the world population was living in cities and that this percentage is constantly increasing. This figure applies not only to almost completely urbanized Western countries, where even farming is completely mechanized, industrialized, and market-driven, but also to Latin America and particularly to Asia and Africa. Their levels of urbanization may yet be substantially lower but these regions nowadays contain the world's largest cities, the magnitude of which completely ridicules earlier scientific debates on the optimum size of cities. Notwithstanding the great difficulties that can be envisaged in creating a sustainable Ecumenopolis that honours human needs

Railway used as a street in Pekojan neighbourhood, Jakarta.



while respecting environmental capacity, I am convinced that this Ecumenopolis is positive in principle. The city figures prominently among great human inventions, such as the use of fire, the invention of the wheel, and the use of steam and electric energy in industry. Generally speaking, by means of high levels of population density cities create opportunities for increased human cooperation and specialization, potentially leading to high levels of production, diversity of life styles and subcultures, and openness to innovation, inter-cultural contact, and interethnic relations. So, whether we like it or not, less than half a century from now the Ecumenopolis will have become reality. The present airline, telephone, fax, and email network that connects all the centres, is nowadays conceived to consist of mega-urban areas of different levels, but should rather be appreciated as Ecumenopolis. The emerging Ecumenopolis and related forms of region-based urbanization with highly discontinuous patterns of land use cannot be explained by means of traditional concepts using, for example, an urban-rural dichotomy or delineating a continuum from village, via town, to city.

### Variety of mega-urban growth

In their work on Southeast Asia, I. Robinson and T.G. McGee state that mega-cities are rapidly expanding beyond their boundaries. 'Metropolitan growth tends to sprawl along major expressways and railroad lines radiating out from the urban cores, and leapfrogs in all directions, putting down new towns and industrial estates. Regions of dense population and mixed land use are created, in which traditional agriculture is found side by side with modern factories, commercial activities, and suburban development.' (McGee and Robinson 1995: ix).

The concept of the extended metropolitan region or *desakota* zones (Bahasa Indonesia for village-town zones) has been coined for this amoebae-like spatial form of region-based urbanization, which seems diametrically opposed to the city-based urbanization to which we are accustomed. According to McGee, these urban regions have several components such as the city-core, the metropolitan area, and the extended metropolitan area, the latter constituting a patched area with mixed agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Pertinently, mega-urban regions may follow divergent patterns of spatial growth. The growth triangle of Singapore is an example of the expanding state model, also involving part of Malaysian Johor and Indonesian Riau. Surabaya is a case in point following the extended metropolitan region model, whereas Jakarta and Manila are examples of high-density extended metropolitan regions.

In this special issue we provide a wide-ranging picture of the tremendous and highly varied impacts of present-day Asian mega-urban growth and transformation, by highlighting a substantial number of cases (namely Tokyo, Beijing, Nanjing, Kunming, Hanoi, Manila, Singapore, Jakarta, Surabaya, Phnom Penh, Delhi, and Tehran) and specific aspects of the urban development process. Some of them describe the spatial development and related planning efforts, for instance those in accordance with the expanding state model in Singapore or the extended metropolitan region model in Surabaya. Others focus on the dynamics of modernization, for example the role of the ICT sector in Nanjing's urban economic development, or the transformation of the retail sector from the open, traditional marketplace to the modern, air-conditioned shopping mall in Jakarta and Kunming. Specific urban problems such as regular flooding in Manila, living and housing conditions of the poor in Delhi, and the change from a socialist to capitalist urban planning in Hanoi, are also important for the understanding of mega-urban transformations in Asia. Asian mega-urbanization as a component of the world informational society entails completely new morphological contexts for living, and fundamental changes in lifestyle, consumption behaviour and production conditions.

Region-based mega-urbanization has to be understood within a broader global and Asian context characterized by the emergence of new forms of international division of labour, global and regional competition, international networks, and development corridors, based on the spillover of development incentives from one mega-urban region into another.

These developments in urbanization are often exclusively described in terms of overwhelming and almost insoluble problems, pointing at excessive population density, deficient infrastructure, traffic congestion, poor housing and living conditions, and so on. These distorted images of immensity, unsustainability, parasitism, extreme poverty, and poor quality of life do not generate adequate and realistic perspectives. Without negating or underrating mega-urban problems the full-fledged urbanization of Asia and the world is quite near and will offer tremendous opportunities for the development of humankind. ◀

### References

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- McGee, T.G., and I. Robinson (eds.), *The Mega-Urban Regions of Southeast Asia*, Vancouver: UBC Press (1995).

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