

Urban Knowledge Network Asia – An update

Thanks to four years of EU-funded research exchanges in combination with a series of supporting activities, the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA) has developed into one of the most significant and dynamic urban research networks in the world to focus on Asian cities. Growing from its core membership in China, India, Western Europe and the USA, UKNA now includes additional partners in Southeast Asia and 'Greater China'. Hopefully, a number of other universities in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia will be able to join the UKNA network in the near future as well.

Gien San Tan, IIAS/UKNA

Human flourishing in Asian cities

Consisting of over 100 researchers with affiliations at 17 institutes in Europe, China, India and the United States, the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA) represents the largest global academic network on Asian cities. UKNA's objective is to nurture contextualised and policy relevant knowledge on Asian cities, seeking to influence policy by contributing insights that put people at the centre of urban governance and development strategies.

UKNA's common vision provides the overarching framework for the network's activities and planned research outputs. It represents the common ground for all partners in the diverse network, encompassing scholars in the social scientists, humanities, the natural sciences and the arts, across 3 continents. The key message of the common vision is that UKNA focuses on 'human flourishing and the creative production of urban space' in Asian cities. The justification for this focus is the realization that most other urban research projects are preoccupied with macro-level topics such as urban infrastructure, architecture and/or the natural environment; human beings appear to be missing in these schemes. The UKNA partners saw an urgent need to bring the well-being ('flourishing') of human beings (whether

urban residents, migrants, and/or citizens) back into the urban research and policy focus. The vision emphasizes 'immediate problem solving as well as the identification of long-term, transformative processes that increase the scope for the active engagement of people in the creative production and shaping of the City'.

Four years of staff exchanges

On 31 March 2016, our Marie Curie Actions/IRSES funding (2012-2016) from the European Union came to an end. We can look back on a very successful first four years. Thanks to EU research mobility support, 146 UKNA scholars and practitioners were able to carry out 206 research exchanges at 12 different UKNA partner institutes. These research exchanges have succeeded in bringing the network partners closer together, around collaborative research initiatives, roundtable and seminar activities on a variety of urban topics in East and South Asia, with comparative cases from European cities.

Publications

Editors from across the UKNA network are currently busy submitting for peer review three edited volumes for publication in the 'Asian Cities' book series of Amsterdam University

Press/IAS. The three volumes –entitled "Ideas of the City in Asia", "Cities by and for the People" and "Future Challenges of Cities in Asia" –contain the work of many researchers who have taken part in the UKNA research staff exchange scheme during the past four years, as well as that of selected external scholars.

Upcoming events

UKNA's annual roundtable will take place this year in Delhi, from 16-20 December. UKNA partners Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD), the Jawaharlal Nehru University Institute of Advanced Study and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) will jointly organize two exciting events in Delhi on the theme of "heritage and infrastructure in the city". The theme focuses on unpacking the city of Delhi through layers of lived history and heritage, urban infrastructure, ecological landscapes and architectural histories.

The first activity is a roundtable on "Urban heritage and a decentralized city museum" (16-17 December). The second activity is a seminar on "Basic urban services in Delhi: citizens, state/policy and politics" (19-20 December). In between the two activities, there will be a guided excursion to the Delhi neighbourhood of Mehrauli, including a visit to its archaeological park and to a new pop-up museum. The multi-disciplinary nature of the Delhi event and the interactive discussion format of both activities characterizes the approach of UKNA and IIAS towards the study of Asian cities.

Moving forward

Even now that the IRSES research exchange funding has ended, the UKNA network will continue. The number of institutional partners in the network continues to grow, as does the number of institutions (both academic and non-academic) and scholars who seek to collaborate with UKNA. Our ambition remains to be an inclusive network that brings together concerned scholars and practitioners engaged in collaborative research on cities in Asia. Our network continues to influence policy by contributing insights that put people at the centre of urban governance and development strategies, with "human flourishing in Asian cities" as our vision.

We will keep you informed about further developments and activities through the Newsletter and via updates on the UKNA website (www.ukna.asia).

Mike Douglass and UKNA: Envisioning human flourishing in resilient Asian cities

Rituparna Roy

DO YOU LIVE IN AN ASIAN CITY? If yes, then how would you describe it? Is it a Mega City? Smart City? Eco City? Is it Resilient? Flourishing? Progressive? Is it a Metropolis or a Globopolis? Do all the adjectives above sound similar to you? Rest assured they are not! Important criteria separate the definitions –and lived realities –of one from the other. Curious about those criteria? Then the person you must meet is Prof. Mike Douglass - who has been engaged with both the theory and practice of urban planning in Asia for more than four decades.

Mike Douglass is Professor and Leader of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster at the Asia Research Institute (one of UKNA's partner institutes), and Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (National University of Singapore). He was recently in Leiden to give a lecture at the International Institute for Asian Studies.

In his insightful lecture, Douglass emphasized that it is no longer enough, or even advisable, for Asian cities of the 21st century to be 'mega' –what they need instead is 'resilience' to tackle the onslaughts of climate change, and the understanding to put 'human flourishing' at the heart of the urbanization enterprise.

One of the biggest challenges facing Asian cities today is natural disasters like flooding and earthquakes –and their management. It is even more challenging when it is a 'compound disaster'; an example would be Japan in 2011 where an earthquake led to a tsunami, which in turn led to a nuclear disaster with long-term devastations. What is most crucial to prevent such tragedies from happening is 'disaster preparedness', but unfortunately most Asian cities (including Jakarta, Manila, Hong-Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Dhaka and Karachi) are 'critically unprepared' in this respect.

Whenever we talk of a 21st century city, the vision that is usually conjured up is that of Skyscrapers and New Towns, Malls and Superhighways, with some 'Mega-project' or other always under construction. In effect, what they have led to is the corporatization of cities; and that, in turn, has resulted

in increasing disparities in well-being among citizens and decreasing participatory governance. It has also led to the disappearance of the 'city' as we know it. As Saskia Sassen rightly pointed out in her 2015 *Guardian* article, 'Who owns our cities': "We are witnessing large scale corporate buying of whole pieces of cities. [...] They raise the density of the city, but they actually de-urbanise it –density is not enough to have a city. If the current large-scale buying continues, we will lose this type of city making that has given our cities their cosmopolitanism. One that alters the historic meaning of the city. Such a transformation has deep and significant implications for equity, democracy and rights."

There's no gainsaying the fact that there has been a concerted effort in the last few decades in many Asian cities towards sustainable development. Hence the recent vogue of 'Eco Cities' and 'Smart Cities' – the former aiming to live in harmony with, and without damaging the environment; and the latter being basically 'wired' cities, seeking to address public issues via ICT-based solutions. The noble intentions notwithstanding, what is missing in the whole enterprise - according to Douglass - is conviviality. Smart Cities are smart and efficient (at least in theory), but they are also automated and anonymous. They lack a sense of community –which is a basic human need. "In human happiness", as Lisa Peattie reminds us, "creative activity and a sense of community count for at least as much and maybe more than material standard of living." What is thus required is the conception of cities as Convivial Spaces –surrounded by human scale architecture, with open public spaces, making use of local cultural practice and with scope for vernacular place-making, that is inclusive and allows for spontaneity.

In short, Douglass thinks that the need of the hour is a different model: not merely 'Sustainable', but 'Livable', 'Progressive' cities –whose hallmarks (apart from conviviality) are inclusion and justice; and which have 'Human Flourishing' (rather than 'Economic Growth') as their core objective. In order to achieve this, Douglass is emphatic that Asian



cities should NOT follow the UN 'Sustainable Development' model, where Economy, Environment and Society are separate entities that intersect at only one point; instead, what should be nurtured is a more holistic approach, where the Economy is seen as embedded in Society, and human Society is seen as an organic part of Nature.

UKNA and the bridging of theory and practice

Many of the problems of urbanization in Asia actually stem from the fact that there is a huge gap between theory and practice when it comes to urban planning. And it is precisely in this respect that Prof. Douglass considers the work of UKNA to be very important – as it is an inclusive network that brings together both scholars and

practitioners in collaborative research on cities in Asia.

In his words: "There are not many places like it. Inter-disciplinary, for one thing. It takes on contemporary issues, not just historical and others. Then there are many, like Paul himself [Paul Rabe, Co-ordinator of UKNA], who like 'practice'. So, it's unique. And it's providing a realm that no other institution is filling. If I look, for example... most Area Studies, if it is in India, it's about India; if it's in China, it's about China. So, they are all very regionally restricted. They are often just pure Humanities, or Social Sciences, and don't get into any kind of real role actually. And they are not trying to build institutions in other parts of the world. Like UKNA, with double Masters Degrees. So, I think it really needs support. And it's unfortunate that all of the indicators have to be quantitative. Because its imprint is much more vast. It is a good idea."