TOWARDS AN OPEN CITY
THE QUITO PAPERS AND
THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

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As Ricky Burdett argues, cities today are being made and re-made at a faster pace and at a larger scale than ever before. The way they are planned and designed is lodged in an ideological and spatial model that is, at best, 80 years out-of-date. Despite the increasing complexity and specificity of the global urban condition, many of the 94 recommendations of the 1933 Charter of Athens still determine the generic forms and physical organisation of 21st century city. ‘Urban space’ has increasingly become the territory of negotiation and confrontation between public and private interests; between politicians, planners, architects and real estate agents; and between banks, financial institutions, speculators, developers and landowners. Yet, the physical solutions remain stubbornly uniform – despite the diversity of architectural styles and the realities of the street has been the erosion of density of occupation and the removal of inconveniently located neighbour-  

While the Charter ends with the exhortation that ‘private interests should be subordinated to the interests of the community’, evidence suggests that many of its principles have inadvertently supported the process of land speculation and increased segregation. For example, prescriptive zoning regulations, which determine the amount and type of development in specific urban districts, have been easily manipulated by lawyers, landowners and investors to maximise value and stifle competition (and, at times, facilitate corruption of malleable city officials). The adoption of major road programmes advocated by the Charter of Athens has led to the destruction of inconveniently located neighbour-  

Not only have the urban conditions changed since the early-20th century, but so have the forces that shape the urban environment. While less than 20% of the world’s population lived in cities in the 1930s when the Charter was being discussed, we are gradually moving to a planet inhabited principally by urban dwellers. The exponential rise in urbanization and globalisation, the transformative effects of new technologies, the implications of climate change and resource scarcity, and the profound increase in inequality have impacted the dynamics of urban growth. Yet, we adhere to technical and spatial solutions that are not only outdated but have demonstrably failed to create liveable and sustainable cities, as set out also in the following chapters.

Planning departments of municipal, metropolitan and central governments are highly regulated and risk-averse, preferring to work with anachronistic, uni-dimensional and rigid urban models conceived before World War II rather than search out new models that respond to the complex social and environmental exigencies of 21st century urbanization. One of the critical aspects of contemporary urbanization that did not preoccupy the authors of the Charter of Athens is the stark difference in patterns of distribution of inequality. Today, 75% of the world’s cities have higher levels of income inequalities than two decades ago. What we are observing today, especially in cities of the developing world, is that social inequality is becoming increasingly segregated and spatialized. Designers, developers, investors and policymakers are faced with increasingly tough choices as to how to intervene within changing urban physical and social landscapes. Who is the city for? How do you reconcile public and private interests? Who pays and who gains? The city planners of London, Paris, Barcelona, Hamburg and New York are grappling with the same questions as the urban leaders of African, Latin American and Asian cities, even though the levels of deprivation and requirements for social infrastructure are of a different order of magnitude. Yet, the design and planning solutions – often imported via international professional offices and consultants – offer remarkably similar solutions whose roots can be traced back to mid-20th century.

The patterns of urbanization patterns of urbanization today require a re-framing of the discourse and practice of planning, one that questions the very tenets of the Charter of Athens and challenges the value of anachronistic ‘bottom-up vs top-down’ models, so heavily rooted in western urbanism. More work is needed to complement the New Urban Agenda, helping to mark a paradigm shift away from the rigidity of the technocratic, generic modernist model we have inherited from the Charter of Athens towards a more open, malleable and incremental urbanism that recognizes the role of space and place—and how they are shaped by planning and design—in making cities more equitable.
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Acknowledgments

Toward an Open City: The Quito Papers and the New Urban Agenda is a working title and subject to change.

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The New Urban Agenda, as adopted in the Habitat III Conference in Quito represents an important milestone. The commitments from Member States are concrete and allow us all to take an important step forward in ensuring that urbanisation becomes a tool for development moving beyond the limitations from Habitat I and II, which focused on the problems associated with urbanisation and the role of local governments.

The debate should not stop here. This publication intends to stimulate further critical thinking on the key challenges of our rapidly evolving urban world and hopes to inspire policy makers, practitioners and engaged citizens. It draws on an ongoing rich dialogue I had the pleasure of taking part in over the last years with thought leaders such as Richard Sennett, Saskia Sassen, and Ricky Burdett from the London School of Economics Cities Programme and the Urban Age series and Shlomo Angel of the New York University.

In our current world, the success of the New Urban Agenda depends on the actions taken by national governments and the compact they make with local governments through their national urban policies. It is a conversation I hope we can broaden and use to prioritize our actions further and lead to even bolder political commitments.

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A massive loss of habitat is accelerating and driving new flows of migration

Extracted from Chapter 2: New Questions of Migration, Land and Water

Emerging flows of migration point to structural changes in the areas of origin

In her current research Saskia Sassen is focusing on a particular set of new migrations that have emerged recently; such migrations are generally far smaller than ongoing older migrations. New migrations are of interest in that they help us understand why a given flow starts and hence tell us something about a larger shifting context. This is the migrant as indicator of emerging changes in the area where they come from, whose impact over time and at scale is still to be fully understood and visible.

She is examining three flows. The first is the sharp increase in the migration of unaccompanied minors from Central America specifically, Honduras, Salvador, and Guatemala. The second is the surge in Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar. And the third is the migration toward Europe originating mostly in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and several African countries, notably Eritrea and Somalia.

These are three very different types of flows, and the third one contains enormously diverse flows. Yet each points to a larger context marked by mostly extreme conditions that can be outlined. The flows are not simply part of a chain migration where households play the central role and make an economic calculus pushing particular family members to opt for migration. These conditions are operating, at the city level, at the regional level, and at a global geopolitical level.

The flows are to be distinguished from the million-plus regular immigrants in the world today, who are mostly modest middle class, increasingly joined by professionals functioning in the global economy. Immigrants enter through formal channels or become formalized eventually in their new home countries. Today’s immigrants are not the poorest in their countries of origin.

Extreme violence is one key factor explaining these new migrations. But it is not the only one. A second key factor is: thirty years of international development policies which have expelled directly and indirectly whole communities from their habitats. Moving to the slums of large cities, or, for those who can afford it, outward migration has increasingly become the last option. This multi-decade history of destructions and expulsions has now reached extreme levels made visible in vast stretches of land and water bodies that are now dead. At least some of the localized wars and conflicts arise from these destructions, in a fight for habitat. Climate change, through increased droughts and/or floods, further reduces liveable ground.

These flows are flows that have only recently started or, if older, have only recently taken on their present sharp features. They point to larger histories and geographies in the making. They could eventually become overwhelming — to existing immigration and refugee policy systems, to the mostly urban areas receiving them, and to the men, women, and children who constitute these flows.
Like many of the participants who took part in the Habitat III conference held in Quito in 2016 – an epochal event that occurs every 20 years – we knew that something good would come out of it. We watched with interest as thousands of urbanists, policymakers and scholars engaged with the lengthy process of agreeing on the manuscript for the New Urban Agenda. We queued in the sun alongside 30,000 others in Quito to witness the adoption by 167 signatory nations of a document that will now shape the debate in global urban policy for decades to come.

But we also knew that this historic event was an opportunity to engage in a parallel process: to radically re-think the way we talk about and make our cities. We shared with Joan Clos – executive director of UN-Habitat and the inspiration behind Habitat III - the belief that the physical and the social are deeply connected in cities, but that somehow the fragile connection was broken by the principles of the Modern Movement enshrined in the 1933 Charter of Athens. This manifesto, conceived on a cruise-ship in the Mediterranean by the leading Modern architects and planners of the day, still influences the shape and the dynamics of urban form 80 years after its formulation. From ‘towers in the park’, to the ‘separation of cars and pedestrians’ and the ‘zoning of different uses’, the Charter provided technical answers to the complex problems of the mid-20th century city.

The built reality of this rationalist vision is palpable in cities and peripheries globally. Regularly spaced high-rise towers, separated by dead space and wide roads into rigid functional zones define the instant cities of Songdo in South Korea, Gurgaon in India and the new urban realities of Kigali and Luanda. Similar typologies mark the dormitory towns on the edges of Istanbul and the centrally planned metropolitan uber-region of Jing-Jin-Ji (120 million people around Beijing) and the economic hubs of the Yangtze and Pearl River deltas in China. These landscapes are familiar, even commonplace in different geographies of the urbanizing world.

We felt there was an opportunity, which Dr.Clos and UN-Habitat embraced, not to offer a 21st century version of the Charter, but to start a discussion that both challenged the status quo and opened up new lines of enquiry. The ‘Quito Papers’ are just that: a collection of statements, considerations and observations which emerge from discussions coordinated by Richard Sennett at NYU with a number of individuals and institutions from different disciplines and professions. The content is intentionally broad, ranging from architecture, planning and urban design, to land ownership and regulation, water management and environmental philosophy. Together, the contributions form a multifaceted assembly of perspectives that critique the tenets of the Charter of Athens, identify new trends and propose new insights on contemporary urbanization.

UN-Habitat has also contributed new research to provide a more complex and complete picture on patterns of global urbanization, focussing on the way cities are expanding without control and highlighting the risks associated with weak leadership and chronic under-investment. The document importantly underscores Dr Clos’ belief that the nation-state plays a critical role in addressing the problems and opportunities of cities across the globe and that we need to re-learn how to plan cities with well-designed public space as a shared common good.

Unlike the 1933 Charter of Athens, the 2016 ‘Quito Papers’ do not propose a manifesto made up of simplistic slogans and recommendations. This is intentional. The urban condition of the 21st century is more fragile and more complex. It requires a different approach.

The ‘Quito Papers’ offer a mirror to cities today. They reflect the potential for wider and more inclusive debate made possible by advances in technology and sharing of information. They recognise that urbanization is incomplete, messy and organic and that the new urban discourse needs to be reflexive of these technologies and processes.
The ideas presented in this document are intended to provoke greater imagination, not propose policies and solutions. Central to this effort is a re-examination of the strict functionalist separation of activities that still dominates planning practices worldwide. It argues in favour of clustering over segregation and isolation. It promotes a line of thinking that recognises the importance of context and time in city-making. The new paradigm encourages the embracement of a broader time horizon, with openness to the past and the anticipation of an uncertain future. It embraces the concepts of flexibility and resilience, accommodating heterogeneity and change, in ways that allow people to re-appropriate spaces and places. Unlike the temporal and spatial certainties of past models, the emerging discourse on cities acknowledges experience, temporality and surprise as central to the choreography of city-making.

Ultimately, the Quito Papers recognise that urbanization is a necessarily open process that is both iterative and incomplete – just like the cities where most of the world’s population will live in a few generations from now. We see this document as a complement to the New Urban Agenda. One of the key legacies of Habitat III should be to mark a paradigm shift away from the rigidity of the technocratic, generic modernist model we have inherited from the Charter of Athens towards a more open, malleable and incremental urbanism that recognises the role of design and space in making cities more equitable. We hope that the ‘Quito Papers’ can contribute to this collective effort.

Many of the 94 recommendations of the 1933 Charter of Athens still determine the generic forms and physical organization of the 21st century city.
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