

Global urbanization, is it sustainable?

The challenge to the UN World Urban Forum in Vancouver, 2006

H. Peter Oberlander

The author is Professor Emeritus and founding Director of the University of British Columbia's School of Community and Regional Planning. He also founded the UBC Centre for Human Settlements, Canada's legacy of HABITAT 1976 Conference. He is currently the Senior Advisor to the Commissioner General of WUF 2006 and was a key organizer of HABITAT 1976, the UN's first conference on Human Settlements. Professor Oberlander was inducted into the Order of Canada in 1995 and promoted to Officer in 2001, with the following Citation: "He is an important advocate of sustainable urbanization – the process of improving the quality of our cities while promoting their sustainable growth. Widely respected by governments and international organizations, he served in the mid-1990s as a Senior Advisor for the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements." The text that follows is a slightly revised and edited version of a paper presented at the international symposium on "The Natural City," Toronto, 23-25 June, 2004, sponsored by the University of Toronto's Division of the Environment, Institute for Environmental Studies, and the World Society for Ekistics.

Introduction

The 19th century is characterized by its radical change of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services resulting in explosive industrialization. The 20th century responded by rapid urbanization, and the 21st century has launched globalization of both industrialization and urbanization at an exponential rate. To varying degrees, all continents are engulfed in the tidal wave of industrialization/urbanization. This inexorable change is sweeping before it all traditions and political structures, and confronting the global community with increasing challenges but also new opportunities.

While this process seems inevitable, is it sustainable in terms of its local, national, and global impacts? A broadly based consensus rooted in professional practice, academic research, and the opportunity for political action indicates that while urbanization is global, it is unsustainable at its current rate of change. Thereby hangs both a global confrontation and the seeds for solutions. Can the rate of change be reduced?

Since the beginning of time, human settlements have been founded, have grown and multiplied, bringing with them successful adaptation to the resulting social, economic and environmental changes. The fundamental difference between these

historic trends and current global consequences is the rate of urbanization and its inability to adjust adequately and comprehensively to the exponential rate of change. The human species, in all its manifestations, has always been able to adjust to more and more people living in more and more cities. That growth was gradual. The unprecedented acceleration of urbanization/industrialization is threatening the world stability and has made the process unsustainable.

As the major nexus of economic and social interchange, the city is in a historic position to mitigate the destructive consequences of globalization.

The UN World Urban Forum, 2006

A unique opportunity for the global community to review current and foreseeable consequences of global urbanization will occur when Canada hosts the UN World Urban Forum in 2006 in Vancouver. This event will celebrate 30 years since the United Nations first came to Canada as HABITAT '76¹ (fig. 1) and launched the global search for solutions to the impending urban



Fig. 1: A photograph from the press conference, to release the Declaration of the Vancouver Symposium on 30 May, 1976, just prior to the UN-Habitat Conference. From left to right: Enrique Peñalosa, Secretary General of Habitat, Maurice Strong, former head of the UN Environment Program and co-Chairman of this Symposium, and Barbara Ward, economist and author. (Source: *Ekistics*, vol. 42, no. 252, November 1976, p. 271).

tsunami. At that time, Canada proposed, as a legacy for HABITAT '76, the creation of the UN Commission on Human Settlements, and its operative Center for Human Settlement, located in Nairobi. Through its Center, the Commission has actively pursued global policies, regional programs, and local projects during three decades, with increasing success. It is now urgent to review and assess success and failure and move the agenda to deal with the increasing speed of urbanization and its potentially devastating environmental and human consequences.

Preceding the recent 2005 UN General Assembly, its Secretary General convened an extraordinary meeting to consider Millennium Development Goals and the process of meeting them, as indicated at the Millennium session of the UN five years ago. At the beginning of our recent millennium, eight Millennium Development Goals were articulated to establish specific practical and achievable targets for the world community to improve life for all and particularly for the poorest of the poor. Goal no. 7, dedicated to ensuring environmental sustainability through its Targets 9, 10, and 11, will form the conceptual framework for presentations and discussions at the World Urban Forum in June 2006.² This Millennium Development Goals framework has become subject to a global contract of UN Member Nations. Indeed on September 15, 2005 Canada signed the UN "Convention" of Millennium Development Goals and thereby committed itself to achieving them within Canada and through the UN community of nations.

Convening the UN World Urban Forum (WUF 2006) in partnership with UN HABITAT in Vancouver and focusing on the implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals raises opportunities and hope that, next spring, those attending the World Urban Forum in Vancouver will live up to its aim of identifying practical solutions to global urbanization and: **taking ideas into action.**

WUF 2006, with its focus on the UN Millennium Development Goals, brings back moving memories of architect and planner, C.A. Doxiadis,³ the father of EKISTICS, the first systematic research and analysis of human settlements that initiated global discussion of urbanization, particularly in terms of its impact on the developing world (figs. 2 and 3).



Fig. 3: The 1964 Delos Symposium (Delos Two), last session. From left to right: Jaqueline Tyrwhitt taking notes, Barbara Ward discussing the text of the Declaration, and Margaret Mead. (Source: C.A. Doxiadis Archives).

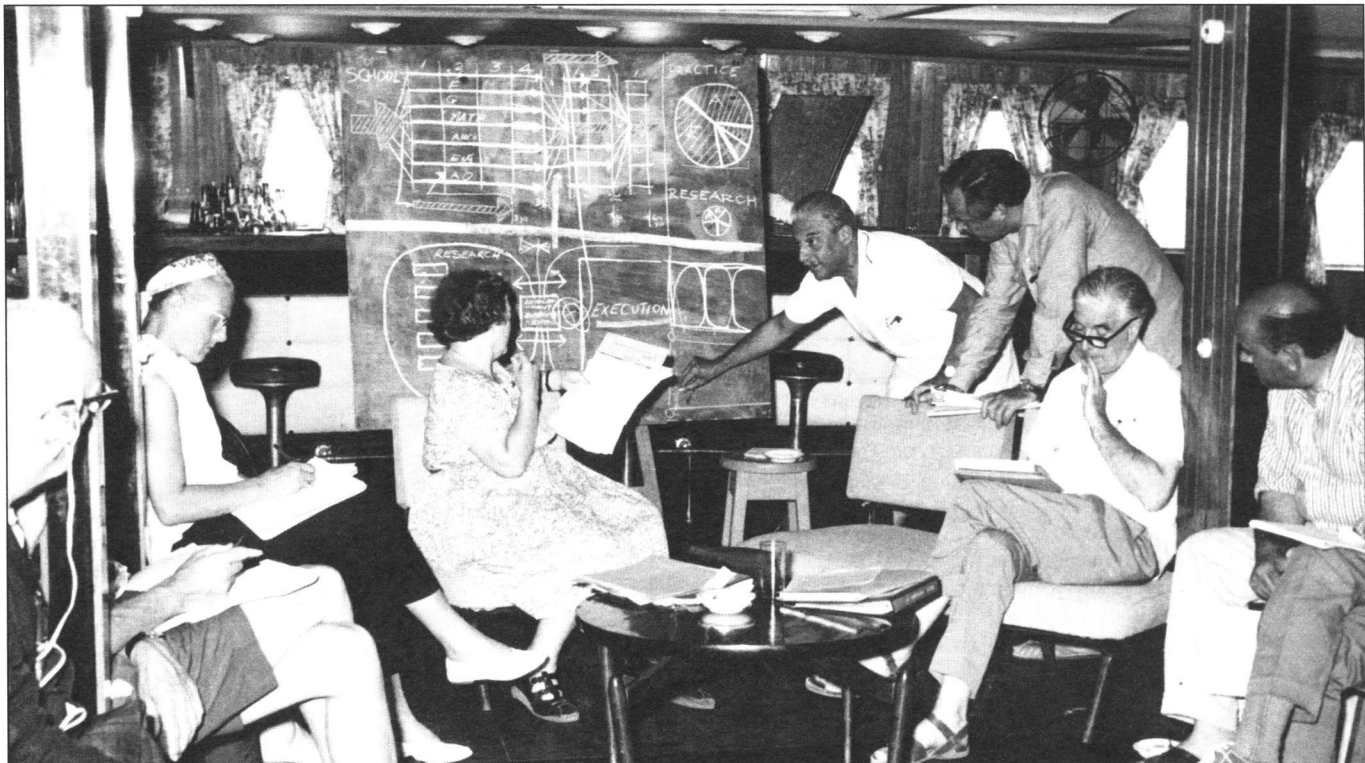


Fig. 2: The Sixth Meeting of the 1964 Delos Symposium (Delos Two) on board ship at the island of Patmos, July 18. From left to right: R. Buckminster Fuller, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Margaret Mead (Chair), C.A. Doxiadis, Lord Llewelyn Davis, Sir Robert Matthew, and Mohamed S. Makiya. (Source: *Ekistics*, vol. 18, no. 107, October 1964, p. 219).

Once again, WUF 2006 will build in Doxiadis' pioneering writings, his Delos Symposia, his Aegean Sea cruises and his continuing rigorous research. Without Doxiadis' initiative, the UN trajectory of timely meetings would never have succeeded. The intellectual and professional activism of urbanist Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson), anthropologist Margaret Mead, editor and author Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, architect Ernest Weissmann, or author Catherine Bauer would never have laid the foundations for the continuing systematic search for solving the problems of exponentially accelerating settlements through global action. Through systematic, multidisciplinary analysis, Doxiadis created the context for national and local political action. Sustainability was the goal, resiliency became the process.

WUF 2006 will celebrate 30 years since the UN Habitat conference met in Vancouver. There, it pursued its agenda through two independent discussions:

- one was the official, formal Assembly of 140 UN Member Nations;
 - the other was an non-governmental organization (NGO) forum.
- These two solitudes barely met and proceeded on their unrecorred trajectory. This will not happen in 2006. WUF III will be an inclusive, integrated, open-ended opportunity for broadly based discussion, analysis and actions.

Another major change since 1976 will be the explicit involvement of the "city building professions," through their regional and national Associations, including the Canadian Institute of Planners, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, the American Institute of Architects, the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects and their international equivalents. Experience has demonstrated that architects, landscape architects, engineers, planners, surveyors and others in public or private practice are responsible for "building the cities," individually and collectively. Through their Associations, these professions are contributing to the current preparations for WUF 2006 and will encourage full membership attendance during the **Forum**. This Congress of Professions will provide a **creative/innovative** opportunity for engaging the consumer and the producer in advancing action to improve life and living, globally.

Accumulated professional experience and public opinion indicate the essential convergence of a deep concern for the built environment and nature, with a unique opportunity for mutual support. The world's urban population is now estimated at six billion. Four billion live **in** cities and the remaining live **by** the city.

Urbanization is global; but its impact is local and varies considerably across the world. Poor and less developed regions are particularly vulnerable and deserve special attention by the global community through the United Nations. Preparations for and

participation in WUF 2006 will allow all of us to compare notes on what is possible and to develop a common agenda of actions to mediate the city's impact on nature.

To reach out to the global community, Canada and UN-Habitat will host *HABITAT JAM* – December 1-3, 2005 – a unique internet-based collaborative event. More than 100,000 people from around the world will have met in real time virtually, to offer guidance on the WUF III agenda. This inaugural online event promises to be one of the most innovative experiments in creating a mechanism for a truly global dialogue, and could become another Canadian innovation.

Conclusion

Urbanization is a given. The question is: "is it sustainable?" Since Rachel Carson raised the alarm more than four decades ago, the city's relationship with nature has been fully described, evaluated and thoroughly measured. Now the time has come to reverse the inevitable and enlist global societies and their human and economic resources to maintain the city's historic civilizing impact.

The forecasted **urban tsunami** has occurred; can we now develop strategies and tactics to turn this reality into a global, sustainable process, and reach beyond the nation-state to connect the cities of the world into a grand alliance? Thereby, could we re-establish the historic leadership role of cities that pre-dates the nation-state and gave us historically "*civitas*" or "*civilization*" and perhaps even move towards global peace?

Editor's notes

1. The Vancouver Symposium was convened for two days just prior to the UN-Habitat Conference, 1976. Participants included the following: Soedjatmoko and M. Strong (Co-Chairmen), B. Ward (Rapporteur), H. Beer, R.R. Bergh, L. Brown, C. Correa, R. Buckminster Fuller, J. Gorynski, J. Gottmann, L.S. El-Hamamsy, J. Hardoy, I. Harrington, O. Koenigsberger, A. Kwapong, A. Laquian, A. Mobogunje, M. Mead, J. Munday, P. Psomopoulos, J. Rios, J. Rouse, E. Terrazas, and J. Ui.
2. The UN lists 3 targets under Goal no. 7: Target 9 – Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs; reverse loss of environmental resources; Target 10 – Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water; Target 11 – Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020 (www.un.org/millenniumgoals).
3. Architect and planner C.A. Doxiadis organized annual "Delos Symposia" where he invited experts from a variety of disciplines, hosting them on a cruise through the Aegean sea, and resulting in a final stop on the island of Delos, where "Delos Declarations" on issues of human settlements and ekistics were submitted to the United Nations.