Urbanism

François Mancebo

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Urbanization appeared with the first permanent human settlements 8,000 years ago. Since then urban development has occurred all across the world, although at different times and in different ways depending on the location. Urbanization occurs in three broad stages. First there is an early period, when improvements in agriculture lead to population growth and more densely populated settlements. Next comes a period of industrialization. New jobs associated with industrialization draw even more people from rural areas, often causing public-health crises as the cities become overcrowded and the infrastructure fails to keep pace with the population. Finally, specialization of urban space occurs.

The Urbanization of Europe

In Europe during the early Middle Ages, the countryside, economically and socially structured by feudal ties, prevailed against the cities. Towns and villages were dependent on it: They needed men and resources to feed their expansion and in return they ensured its protection. But a drastic shift in this process took place between the twelfth century and the fourteenth centuries, first in what is now Italy and later in what is now Germany: Burghers began purchasing land in the countryside and became landlords, which gave them a new type of authority over farmers. From then on city inhabitants were at the same time landowners and middlemen marketing agricultural produce. Not only the poor but also the wealthy sought to live in cities. For the latter, the possession of an urban residence was a symbol of an enviable social position and prosperity. Gradually rural towns and hamlets came to import their expressions, beliefs, and ways of thinking from urban society.

As a result, during the Renaissance cities enjoyed a very positive image. Urban landscapes continued to become more and more important through the seventeenth century, but it was not until the eighteenth century that cities escaped the confines of walled fortifications, remnants of earlier eras when walls protected the inhabitants from invaders. Prior to the eighteenth century European cities grew concentrically, with continual building of bulwarks that were successively outgrown. The urban population contained within could grow only slowly, and urban identities formed in the confrontation between the inside and the outside of the city walls.

A major change in the process of urbanization occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The first industrial revolution, with its steam engines and its revolution in coal mining and metallurgy, led to sharp population increases in already densely populated cities. A housing crisis developed, with high rents, appalling sanitary conditions in large pockets of poverty, and consequent epidemics. Above all else the rootlessness of country newcomers contributed to quick deterioration in urban life. Urban morphology had to change: The nineteenth century saw continuous building of wide boulevards and avenues for pedestrians, public parks and gardens, and other public amenities. City walls disappeared gradually and the city spread beyond its traditional limits. Suburban areas also developed; in them were concentrated activities excluded from the cities, including craft industries, workshops, and polluting and dirty industrial plants. These areas on the outskirts of the cities offered cheap, comfortless apartments.

In mid-twentieth-century Europe, suburbs offered inexpensive housing for working-class people, and working-class suburban neighborhoods were characterized by dense community life and strong associational networks. There, populations of all origins lived side by side and finally could meet and mix in a fluid social environment. At the same time the concentric model of urban development persisted there: local

governments drew urban limits (the twentieth-century equivalent of medieval walls) and enacted regulations that they themselves broke sooner or later. Thus these built-up areas formed step by step: each urban belt prefigured the next one. In this sense no city can be invented from nothing; it builds on what comes before it. This type of urban sprawl is caused by the narrow-minded conviction that the newcomers have to make room for themselves. Thus, the distance from residence to downtown or to other attractive areas increases with recentness of arrival: the more recently one has arrived, the more distant one's residence.

In the second half of the twentieth century a gradual specialization of European urban space occurred. Simultaneously a huge traffic increase and urban policies based on the creation of new towns (such as Harlow near London) and high-density housing complexes began to change suburban morphology and fabric. Urban wastelands began to appear in every urban interstice. Meanwhile, town planners gained renewed interest in old warehouses and industrial buildings, turning them to such diverse uses as condominiums, art galleries, and shopping complexes. At the same time, suburban midtowns gradually took on some of the architectural features of urban centers.

The Reign of the City

The twentieth century saw the acceleration of global urbanization, and the emergence of huge metropolises. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, 500 cities will exceed the million-inhabitants mark, and within two generations there will be 400<N>500 million additional urban residents living in city extensions.

Many large cities are plagued by high population density, tremendous environmental pressures, and urban sprawl<M>intense and anarchic urbanization, a problem first observed in North America. Causes of urban sprawl vary with the city. In some cases it is caused by middle classes fleeing older urban areas; in others it is caused by the growth of business parks, which are established in suburbs, where there is space, rather than in the crowded and often expensive city centers. In the First World, policies promoting individual home ownership also contribute to urban sprawl, while in the Third World shantytowns form as rural populations continue to migrate to the outer edges of large cities, partially as a result of inadequate land policy in Third World nations.

Thus, urban space loses its structure. Paradoxically the present reign of the city may lead to the death of the city<M>to the disappearance of an urban sociability that was peculiar to cities. In this context it is reasonable to ask to whom cities belong, and where and how new urban structures can emerge.

Spatial Segregation in Cities

Residential segregation, whether economic, social, or cultural, is a major theme in urban studies. It can be defined as the creation of a spatial divide separating different human groups. Such a situation may emerge spontaneously, but it can also be imposed. One ancient example of imposed segregation is that of the ghetto. *Ghetto* was originally the name of a Jewish district of Venice during the Italian Renaissance. By extension, it came to refer to any district to which Jews were confined in central and eastern Europe. Nowadays the word *ghetto* applies to any confined urban area where an ethnic, cultural, or religious minority is overrepresented.

A soft socioeconomic type of segregation appeared in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century: government housing comprising large multistory housing estates that formed complexes of between

a thousand and several thousand apartments. The first ones appeared in 1935 in western Europe. In France, they were supposed to cope with the influx of rural people to the city and to provide better housing than was available in outlying shanty districts and poor inner-city neighborhoods. At first they attracted members of the middle classes looking for functional and comfortable apartments, but progressively middle-class families moved away to suburban allotments of detached one-family houses, and the multistory complexes came to house unemployed immigrants and people whose very modest incomes did not permit them to live anywhere else. The anonymity and alienation caused by the complexes' excessive size, and their remoteness from the city centers, made these complexes ripe for the development of crime and insecurity. As the buildings deteriorate and living conditions worsen, the situation for the residents becomes as bad as it was in the poor-quality housing that the complexes were intended to replace.

In Europe the term *tenement* indicates degraded multifamily dwellings well integrated in the urban fabric. Most European tenements are old constructions found in old urban centers, or in the areas around old urban centers. Buildings are subdivided into tiny apartments without facilities, with public toilets for the residents on every floor. Different words designate this kind of housing across the world: they are called *cortiços* in Brazil, *vecindades* in Mexico City, *conventillos* in Buenos Aires, *taudis* in France. During the 1960s and 1970s successive French governments developed an initiative known as the *procédure d'habitat insalubre* ("substandard housing procedure") to renovate urban tenements. It was based on an expropriation system: Tenements were demolished or rehabilitated and their residents entitled to rehousing, mainly in the sorts of multistory complexes mentioned earlier. Another initiative offered grants for housing improvement, but that program was a failure because as the houses and apartments gained value after the improvements, most of the residents, who often had only tenuous leases (sometime only verbal agreements) no longer could afford them and were then evicted.

In developing countries deliberate urban segregation is frequent. It results from the mushrooming of substandard housing in extended informal housing zones. In the big cities of the Third World, poor and underequipped suburbs are the only places where a major portion of the population can afford to live. Most of the buildings in these suburbs are illegal in every respect, and overall they are unplanned constructions in areas without such basic infrastructure as running water and electricity. But they differ from shantytowns in that they are made up of tiny permanent detached houses made of bricks or cinder blocks, whereas shantytown dwellings are generally made of scrap materials and have a more temporary character.

Informal Housing in the Third World

Informal housing, whatever its nature, often develops in three stages: First a spontaneous slum appears; it is followed by permanent buildings and a few facilities. Finally authorities proceed either with mass evictions, usually preceding land development, or to recognize and formalize the residents' rights to the land they have occupied.

During the first stage, occupiers possess no title deed: They settle on public property or other peoples' private property. Possibly they pay entrance fees and rent to the legal landowners or to those who make themselves out as such. They usually also have to give the authorities bribes in order to build their shanties. In some cases they legally acquire the land, but build on it illegally (for example, if it is designated agricultural land). This stage is known as squatting in English-speaking countries and as invasion in Latin America.

Of course, the residents run the risk of being expelled. In that case, they are often rehoused on a plot of land in some outlying area. Whether the administration decides on official recognition or expulsion depends

largely on the level of land speculation and on the balance of power between the squatters and the authorities. Generally, collective organizations (associations, nongovernmental organizations, cooperatives) strengthen the position of the residents. If the residents quickly build themselves permanent constructions and create embryonic community facilities (daycare centers, schools, health centers), they increase the chances of receiving formal recognition of their right to the land. This strategy is usually more effective on public lands of poor value than on private lands with higher value.

Since the late 1980s, the trend has been toward formally recognizing squatters' rights, precisely because informal housing often compensates for the deficiencies of urban policies in Third World countries. During the last three decades of the twentieth century, squatting on undeveloped peripheral lands was the main means of urban property production in Latin America.

Gentrification and Urban Secession (Gated Communities)

While in Latin American cities squatters' constructions are decreasing due to land blockings (reserving land for special purposes to keep out squatters)and central urban poverty is increasing, the First World is experiencing the phenomenon of gentrification<M> rehabilitation and urban renewal of rundown inner-city neighborhoods. Gentrified districts are then occupied by members of the upper and upper middle classes, who return from the suburbs to which they once fled. The consequences of gentrification are threefold: the displacement of the inner-city neighborhoods' original populations, who are too poor to afford to live in the neighborhood once it has been gentrified, a consequent increase in homelessness, and an acceleration of social and geographic urban fragmentation.

In some countries, urban policies try to temper this process. Participative housing improvement programs can ensure social urban mix in downtown areas, with cheaper apartments and residents with lower incomes, thus reducing the impact of gentrification.

Urban secession, a worldwide phenomenon, is the creation of autonomous urban enclaves that avoid the rules of urban life and urban management that previously applied to the urban population as a whole. Secessionists take charge of their own services (garbage collection or public lighting, for example), thus eluding the financing of collective services that do not concern them any more. Not trusting local authorities, they take it upon themselves to pay for protection against real or imagined threats in the outside world.

These private places are chiefly new developments, but some of them result from the closing off of preexisting urban areas, including public places and streets. The phenomenon has expanded particularly fast in the United States: At present there are more than twenty thousand gated communities there, and more than 8 million Americans live in these enclosed private zones.

These communities are designated by different terms depending on the country. They also differ in character: North American gated communities are quite different from the *barrios privados* or *cerradas* of Latin America, and from the townhouses of South Africa, which constitute extreme cases in terms of spatial separation and social divide. Latin America's gated communities are often called fortified enclaves, and with their outer walls, video surveillance, private militias with armed guards, and checkpoints at the entrances, they do call to mind medieval fortresses.

Although urban secession is generally an upper- and upper-middle-class phenomenon, socioeconomic factors are not sufficient to explain it. Today in Latin America one can observe the creation of some private urban communities in middle-class and even substandard housing areas: The residents negotiate

with the authorities the right to close the streets in order to have exclusive and controlled access.

Often, when you ask residents of gated communities the reasons for such a way of life, they cite security and ecological or recreational factors: They wish to preserve the living environment at its current standard, for example, or they wish to control access to a golf course. But in aggregate, the main factor seems to be a desire for socioeconomic homogeneity.

Fragmented Cities

As a result of the complex urban processes discussed above, two extreme and symmetric trends are dismembering the fabric of urban life. On the one hand, those who are socially or economically excluded reject the values of the surrounding society and take a position of hardened opposition to political, administrative, judicial, and law enforcement institutions. On the other, the wealthy reject any sense of social responsibility and lock themselves away in totally unapproachable private communities that are removed from public jurisdiction.

Urban community and connectedness are disintegrating progressively under the influence of these two forces. The notion of the fragmented city appeared in the late 1980s to describe the results of this disintegration. Analysts posited four factors that contributed to fragmentation: an extreme diversity of social references and customs among the urban population; an increase in socioeconomic disparities; the growth of exclusion dynamics founded on ethnic, social, or cultural bases; and social disaffiliation. Other terms for this phenomenon of fragmentation include balkanization, archipelagization, and sociospatial polarization.

In some cases dual cities appear, divided into two parts of uneven value, impenetrable and far away from each other: the wealthy city and the excluded city. Brazilian geographers have been working long on this notion in São Paulo's very tense context.

The Future: From Spatial Fragmentation to Social Fragmentation

Actual urban trends are toward generalized spatial urban fragmentation. If the trend is taken to its extreme, the result would be the break-up of society into a myriad small communities with strong ties based on social standing and cultural, ethnic, or religious referents, each one enclosed in its own private space. Urban territories as a whole would tend to become collections of private districts where groups would live in a more or less self-sufficient way. The city would then lose its integrative function, and spatial fragmentation would lead to social fragmentation.

Eventually this would mean the disappearance of public amenities (parks, markets, roads and sidewalks, public buildings). Their replacement by private imitations of public amenities (an example being shopping malls) is an expression of the loss of common urban values. Fragmented cities force us to reconsider traditional interpretations of urban social dynamics.

François Mancebo

See also JACOBS, JANE; NEW URBANISM; WIRTH, LEWIS

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