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Knowledge for better Cities

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Concluding Report Track 2: Valuing What Already Exists

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Some 30 papers were presented over 5 sessions during Track 2. They covered a kaleidoscope of issues (macro and micro, local and global, planned and unplanned). The presentations engendered intense discussions on what, why and how urban planners and designers could value what already exists when dealing with urbanisation and transitioning to more sustainable communities. In particular, there is much interest on unpacking the common challenges and negotiation of choices, trade-offs and tensions among different values, objectives and uses. Examples and case studies were often highlighted to help urban planners learn from the past and the present even as they plan for the future.

Against rapid urbanisation, the clarion call is for better understanding of existing contexts and developments, to know the constraints and choices for making better future cities.

Several common challenges were identified in the making of sustainable communities. On a global scale, these included demographics (growth and decline), urbanisation, climate change and a lack of capacity and capability to effectively deal with these. Increasing population and population density, especially the growth acceleration in the developing countries of Africa and Asia, presents enormous difficulties for planners. Many a time, planners in these countries possess neither the influence nor the tools to counteract or mitigate the growth acceleration consequences. The inevitable outcome is often unplanned growth and deficiencies of all kinds, ranging from education and health services to inadequate housing supply and infrastructure.

On a country and/or city level, these challenges are frequently compounded by a multiplicity of local conditions and problems, sometimes occurring all at once and straining municipal capacity to handle the challenges. They include,

- **Cost of food** such as currently experienced most dramatically in India. This further accelerates the existing urban divide and social segregation between the affluent and the disadvantaged citizens in urban areas;
- **Population depletion in rural areas** in many rapidly urbanising Asian countries (e.g. China, India) where the consequences of mass migration from rural areas to urban areas have rendered villages demographically out-of-balance with a high proportion of senior residents;
- **Aging population** in developed as well as developing countries of Asia. This demographic trend presents communities from Australia to Europe with additional challenges not only for social

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services but also for urban design and architecture;

- **Urban poverty and slum populations,** often living in poorly serviced and hazardous areas of the city. The numbers are far from diminishing. Half a million residents live in informal settlements in Cape Town, South Africa. The problem has been exacerbated by recent increase in the development of luxury housing, even in poor African countries by developers searching for new areas of profit, bringing displacements and market-driven eviction processes;
- **Protection of identities** in the face of rapid urbanization. It has become crucial for cities to safeguard their cultural heritage, neighbourhoods, public spaces and individual buildings that are exposed to modern development pressure, e.g. in Africa (Ife Ife), India (Kolkata), Taiwan and China (Beijing, Shanghai) where cultural heritage is gradually eliminated in the course of urban renewal;
- **Shifting economic climate**, bringing uneven distribution of employment, further accelerating urban migration and environmental damage, causing pollution in the cities and exploitation of natural resources (water, minerals, etc) in rural areas (e.g. West Kimberley region in Western Australia);
- **Shortage of land for affordable housing** is a common local problem in many cities in developed and developing countries**,** from Western Australia to China (e.g. Beijing) or Africa (e.g. Cape Town);
- **Land use conflicts**, often between industrial and residential uses, arising from housing pressure and shortage of land for affordable housing;
- **Climate change, flooding and coastal erosion** have accelerated and threatened the livelihoods of coastal communities. In many coastal or riverbank communities, building sites are zoned too close to the water or in floodplains, endangering the lives and properties of their inhabitants (e.g. New Orleans, USA).
- **Weak planning**, whether uncoordinated planning or the lack of plans and policies lead to uncontrolled development, e.g. Hangzhou where the highly valued landscape of its West Lake is encroached upon by the city's fast rising modern skyscraper skyline, where zoning paid no attention to the preservation of the historic character of the waterfront. Another example where pristine landscape can be threatened by wrong planning decisions is offered in the case study of Gdansk, Poland. The natural landscape is put at risk of degradation by exploitive, intrusive, market-driven development with no sensitivity for local condition or heritage.

Even as the presentations highlight the numerous challenges faced in sustainable community development, various speakers also shared their experiences in addressing the challenges. These include, for example,

- **Land use plans,** e.g. spatial planning framework, flood adaptation land use plan, waterfront regeneration plan. Planning presents a powerful tool to address incompatible land uses and promote low impact and sustainable development. An example is the case study in Yunlin County, Taiwan, which shows the potential of spatial planning under restricted natural conditions;

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- **Human scale streetscape** is especially needed in older neighbourhoods of the city to protect local identity and sense of place, e.g. in Kolkata, India, which is increasingly threatened by transformation due to new large-scale development projects; in Suzhou, China where the lingering character of historic squares and commercial streets could contribute to the preservation of cultural values, support local artistry and strengthen local identity and the city's economy. It is important to find a balance between conservation and construction. Some of the tools include landscape visual evaluation, remodelling approaches to create dynamic, competitive environment full of human temperament;
- **Integrated resource management**, e.g. developing integrated water resource management guidelines at river basin level to ensure land, water and food security, e.g. in West Kimberley region of Western Australia. This calls for a more organic way of thinking and acting, involving apprehension (identifying who we are), visioning (conceptualising what we can expect in the long term), propositions (coordinating what we can do in the short term), decision, determination and discernment (reaching an agreement on what do we do) and commitment (implementing, monitoring and evaluating what we have done);
- **Smart cities**, e.g. eco-city, low carbon society to provide pathways for cities and urban areas to adapt and build infrastructure and neighbourhoods that reduce energy consumption, carbon emissions and enable residents to adopt low carbon lifestyles. Examples include eco-precinct and eco-town development in Singapore, Bolzano smart energy city, European Smart City and Community platform.

What is needed moving forward is integrated planning, a multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary approach based on collaboration and partnership that,

- Understands the local context with sensitivity;
- Integrates the past, present and future; and
- Engages in research and provides empirical evidence to inform policymaking.