

By Rafal Hejne

# AMERICAN DREAM

VS.

# AMERICAN RESPONSIBILITIES

→ *Lessons learned from a global 5months5cities project.*



**BY 2050, 75 PERCENT OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION** will be living in cities that will be required to accommodate an additional 3.1 billion people. It is hard to believe, but in 1950 there were only two megacities—New York and Tokyo—with more than 10 million residents. Sixty years later, in 2010, we had at least 26 megacities.

By 2015, the number of megacities is expected to reach 33, with 27 in developing countries. Loving cities myself and devoting my career to city management, I decided to learn more about this fast-paced change.

With the 5months5cities project, I visited five of the world's largest cities: New Delhi, India; Mexico City, Mexico; Shanghai, China; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Johannesburg, South Africa. I spent a month in each place to develop an understanding of the place and learn about its major challenges.

These days, we observe a renewed optimism that cities can be exciting and creative places. Not denying that optimism, I observed that a new urban era requires a new model to manage our cities. Doing business as usual is not an option anymore.

In the United States, we should know the best and understand the importance of smart city growth. A lot of American local governments, however, still deal with the fatal consequences of urban sprawl and uncultivated growth.

## Enter Sustainability

The major focus of my city exploration was to see how sustainability is being practiced across the selected cities. Unfortunately, I was shocked at the extent to which cities are currently polluted. Despite the green populism present in each city, I observed that little is actually being done to put sustainable management practices in place.

We need to remind ourselves that in the United States many cities have not changed the way they operate and grow. People still do not want to change their lifestyles. Yet residents in the cities of the developing world look up to Americans and the American dream. They want to follow it.

Are cities in the United States sending them a clear signal that urban sprawl and overconsumption have failed and that it is not sustainable to continue like that?

When I arrived to New Delhi, the air was dark and cloudy because of smog. The health impacts of the city's air pollution are devastating. In 2009, approximately 10,900 premature deaths were due to the particulate matter pollution. Not surprisingly, Delhi was declared the "asthma capital" of India in 2009.

Growing traditional motorization and the absence of an efficient public transport system are examples of major factors that have contributed to Delhi's man-made disaster. It is estimated that 1,000 new cars enter Delhi's roads every day. Is this sustainable? The answer is short: no, it is not.

Air pollution, although present in all five cities visited, was not the only man-made environmental disaster I came across. Mexico City, with a

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population of more than 20 million residents, faces a severe water crisis. Less than 10 percent of Mexico City's water is recycled. The city transports water through pipes from a community more than 60 miles away.

Each year the city itself sinks by roughly 4 inches into the old lake bed on which it is built, as water is continuously pumped from wells. Some historical buildings in Zócalo, Mexico City's old town, have dropped more than 23 feet since 1891. Why? Again, the lack of respect for ambient environment led to the collapse of the local ecosystem.

### Current Models Fail

The environmental disasters in the megacities have been exacerbated by the division of these urban areas into bipolar communities, namely with extremely poor neighborhoods on one end and an unbelievably wealthy minority on the other. Unfortunately, the enormous economic growth that is currently happening in the five cities I visited benefits only a few.

In Johannesburg, the economic heart of South Africa, residential areas range from luxurious, wooded suburbs to shantytowns and squatter settlements. In Rio de Janeiro, sometimes called the wonder city, approximately 1.3 million people live in 750 *favelas* (the Brazilian equivalent of a slum). Worldwide, 1 billion people live in slums; a figure predicted to double to 2 billion by 2030. Unfortunately, social mobility in large cities is marginal.

Our current economic development

models, mostly created in our cities, fail to tackle the problem of social and environmental fairness. We cannot continue functioning like this. This is a dead-end road. Cities can be exciting places, but they must work hard to achieve fairness. We need to find a new way to manage city economies.

Changing the current models will not be easy, nor will it happen overnight. In the United States during the 1980s, using the principles of the new urbanism, we started the necessary change. Yet there still are communities that embrace car-oriented growth and suburban cultures.

Today we need to start taking into account the impacts of our actions in the short term and in the long term. In the United States we have even greater responsibility to do so since many developing nations look up to us and copy our solutions. Any development should find the best way to contribute to the environment, not destroy it.

### Environmental and Social Fairness

Such a simple principle, yet so hard to follow. Fortunately, we can learn from several smart projects in cities I visited. In Mexico City I came across "a story of Mexico City," an initiative that develops a comprehensive understanding of the place, including its geology, hydrology, culture, and sociology.

Such a deep learning process is necessary if we are to identify major leverage points that will allow us to heal a city. Development carried out this way will contribute to a place instead of destroying it or being no

better than neutral.

Shanghai's economy signaled the possibility—not just the desirability—of development without further harm to the environment if the right set of policy measures and appropriate technologies are applied.

From 2000 to 2008, Shanghai's environmental investment accounted for more than 3 percent of the city's annual gross domestic product. This is exactly what Global Urban Development (GUD), an organization located in Washington, D.C., advocates. GUD predicts that green economic development will be profitable and fair to everybody if done soon and done right.

GUD developed a sustainable economic development framework to assist places with growing smart. This goes beyond advocating solely for environmental protection. Especially in the developed world, we should be well past this stage.

GUD promotes a new approach to managing urban growth. It is based on environmental and social fairness. This sounds like a good start to me. I want our local communities as well as communities in the developing world to be flourishing 50 years from now. **PM**



**RAFAL HEJNE** was ICMA's 2007 Management Fellow based in San Jose, California. He created and self-financed this pro bono project to learn about city challenges around the globe. You can support Rafal's dream at [www.5months5cities.com](http://www.5months5cities.com). He currently works as part of a management program in the United Kingdom, working for the London Borough of Camden. He is also a fellow at Global Urban Development, Washington, D.C.