

# Urban Age Shaping Cities

## Conference Summary

*Video and slides for every contribution are available at [urbanage.lsecities.net](http://urbanage.lsecities.net).*

### Overview

On July 14-15, the [Urban Age 'Shaping Cities' conference](#) brought over 40 speakers from 25 cities to Venice. Over two days and across six sessions, mayors, planners, architects, academics and commentators grappled with the dominant questions of an increasingly urban 21<sup>st</sup> century: How are cities shaped? By whom and for whom? How are their conflicts – inequality, climate change, urban growth and expansion, informality, democratic representation and urban stewardship – experienced and lived by the majority of urban dwellers? And, what can be done to make cities more tolerant, adaptable and sustainable?

This was the 16<sup>th</sup> in a series of [Urban Age conferences](#). Since 2005, over 6,000 speakers and participants have participated in conferences in several rapidly growing and mature cities including Istanbul, Delhi, New York City, Mexico City, Hong Kong, Rio de Janeiro, London and Johannesburg. Urban Age is a worldwide investigation into the future of cities by [LSE Cities](#) at the London School of Economics and Deutsche bank's [Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft](#).

### Day 1

#### *Introduction and overview*

[Paul Achleitner](#) (Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft) and [Paolo Baratta](#) (La Biennale di Venezia) opened the conference, before [Ricky Burdett](#) (Urban Age/LSE Cities), outlined its key themes and goals: “The Urban Age is about connecting the social city with its physical form and understanding not only the scale of urban growth, but also how it shapes and is shaped by a wider political, economic and social context.”

#### *Who owns the city?*

This session was opened by [Ada Colau](#), the recently elected grassroots Mayor of Barcelona. A long-standing anti-eviction campaigner, Colau argued that the main force behind her election as mayor was the failure of a powerful but exclusionary model of urban economic development based on the primacy of private capital and elite financial interests. Describing the challenge of transitioning from activism to a position of power, she outlined her vision of “democratic regeneration and citizen empowerment” and a new “municipalism” based on alliances between radical city governments across Europe.

This raised a number of issues which were addressed by other speakers and panellists. [Saskia Sassen](#) argued that secretive transnational property markets were contributing to “de-urbanisation” in global cities, while Paris Deputy Mayor [Jean-Louis Missika](#) discussed his city's attempts to balance the involvement of private developers in urban projects with broader social objectives.

Panellists [Ed Glaeser](#) (Harvard) and [Yolande Barnes](#) (Savills Real Estate), however, questioned how we define urban rights and citizenship: Glaeser arguing, for example, that people do not have an inalienable right to drive cars in a city without adequately paying for it and Barnes suggesting that high rents and land values are simply a result of “too many people not having enough city to go around.”

#### *Expansion or redevelopment?*

After exploring the question of ownership, the conference took a more spatial focus, with its second session examining whether spatial planning can steer urban growth and what the impacts of urban form are, if any, on productivity, the environment and social inclusion.

[Joan Clos](#) outlined UN-Habitat's principles for a New Urban Agenda based on addressing the global trend of unplanned, informal urbanisation. This trend, he argued, is resulting in declining public space and inefficient urban sprawl, which is creating unproductive cities.

While [Mark Swilling](#) (Stellenbosch University) reiterated the environmental ramifications of excessive urban expansion, [Shlomo Angel](#) (NYU) suggested that policymakers need to accept expansion as a reality, and adopt a paradigm of "making room" rather than "containment." During the panel discussion, [Enrique Peñalosa](#) highlighted the practical challenge of trying to contain the outward growth of Bogotá, instead prescribing a mix of expansion and redevelopment.

#### *Adaptation and social integration*

[Richard Sennett](#) (LSE and NYU) began the final session of day one by observing: "We are stimulated by the unfamiliar and by different people, that's why we live in cities." Drawing from Sennett's notion of the "open city", this session explored how existing urban residents adapt to the arrival of newcomers – people of different economic classes, ethnic groups and political allegiances – and how their interactions can be shaped by different physical environments.

[Suzanne Hall](#) (LSE Cities) presented her work on migrant streets across the UK, reflecting on the ability of migrants and refugees to create resilient economies and social networks embodied on the high street. Some streets, she noted, are more like small factories, with over 700 jobs; many of their residents are also highly skilled.

The presentations, responses and discussion provoked further questions about how to understand the social fabric of cities. [AbdouMaliq Simone](#) (Max Planck Institute for Religious and Ethnic Diversity), for example, suggested that the lens of the "household" is over-used by urban policymakers, obscuring how most urban residents actually live. The place of planning and design in an "open" or "porous" city was also raised, with Jean-Louis Missika arguing that urban planning is important but not sufficient for building social relationships between communities.

## **Day 2**

### *Urban solutions: what role for architecture?*

The second day of the "Shaping Cities" conference shifted more directly to architecture and design. Its first session expanded to the urban dimension the themes addressed by the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale, "Reporting from the Front," which explores how design ingenuity can be harnessed to respond to everyday social and environmental battles.

[Alejandro Aravena](#) (ELEMENTAL) began by suggesting that cities can be "shortcuts" to greater social equity – presenting a major opportunity for architects. [Rahul Mehrotra](#) (Harvard), another key figure in the Biennale, questioned why architects are designing for "absolutes", when, instead, they should be focused on "transitions". NLÉ's [Kunlé Adeyemi](#) also addressed the social potential of innovative architecture, highlighting his work in Lagos in making fragile coastal areas more resilient to environmental threats.

The [panel discussion](#) investigated how aesthetics can be integrated with social purpose, while questioning the limits of the design profession in addressing both the scale and nature of the urban condition. As co-chair Ricky Burdett suggested, many of the best examples of urban design do not come from architects – requiring a much wider and self-critical outlook within the profession.

### *Scales of intervention*

Day 2 continued with a double-session focused on scales of urban intervention. The first concerned "solutions from below"; small-scale, community-led urban projects relating to infrastructure, housing and migration. Architectural designer and urban researcher [Julia King](#) (LSE Cities), in her presentation on sanitation in Delhi, argued that small-scale projects can act as a form of resistance to attempts at building unequal "world-class cities", while MoMA's [Sean Anderson](#) reflected on the need for architects to help humanise global refugee camps, which increasingly resemble "proto-cities."

“Solutions from below” also raised more fundamental questions about the goals that architects set for themselves, with [Jo Noero](#) (Noero Architects) arguing that the focus should not be on “saving the world”, but simply getting small projects right. This debate was picked up in “Solutions from above”, where [Kees Christiaanse](#) (KCAP) began by observing that although many large-scale urban projects “look like aircraft carriers”, they can eventually become a crucial part of the city.

[Jose Castillo](#) (a911) challenged the notion of choosing between “top-down” and “bottom-up” – a choice, he said, between “your mother and your father.” [Stefano Recalcati](#) (Arup), meanwhile, demonstrated how large-scale interventions have attempted to rejuvenate urban waterfronts, including Marghera in Venice and the Docklands in Dublin.

### *Shaping the New Urban Agenda*

The final session of the conference focused on the main messages emerging from architecture, urban design and planning for Habitat III. It addressed, in particular, the debates and issues that will inform the Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador in October 2016, as well as the New Urban Agenda which aims to shape urban policymaking over the coming decades.

Bogotá’s [Enrique Peñalosa](#) articulated an urban vision based on inclusive cities connected by public transport. He described urban highways promoting private car use as “poisonous rivers”, presenting Bogotá’s experiments with protected cycle-ways and bus rapid transit as examples for other emerging cities to follow. Kampala’s [Jennifer Musisi](#) (KCCA) described the governance challenges facing Kampala, arguing that urbanisation in Africa will play a major role in shaping a global urban future.

Throughout the discussion, audience members, [panellists and speakers debated](#) the place of the “Right to the City” in the New Urban Agenda and the capacity of UN-Habitat to deliver on its mandate to encourage inclusive and sustainable urban development. Jagan Shah (NIUA, India) outlined the importance of public-private partnerships and effective urban governance, while Ricky Burdett suggested that the risk with Habitat-III is using language that doesn’t clearly translate the link between spatial and social issues, instead encouraging experts to remain in silos.

[Joan Clos](#), in his concluding remarks, argued that the world has enough architecture “but not enough urbanism.”

The next [Urban Age](#) conference will be the second to take place in Africa.