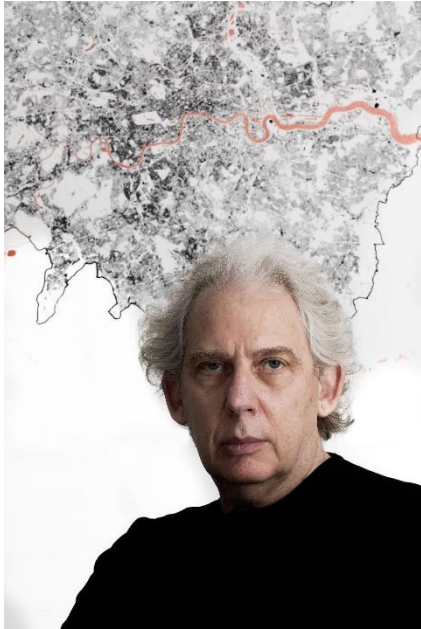


EL PAIS, 12 MAY 2019

SPECIAL ISSUE ON CITIES

Interview with Ricky Burdett, director of LSE Cities, by Anatxu Zabalbeascoa

**"The training of architects is not particularly focused on the needs of the real world"**



*He is one of the greatest experts in urban planning in the world. Architect, curator of the Venice Biennale and adviser to Mayor of London Ken Livingstone, has lived half a lifetime in the British capital and believes that in the coming years the lack of a order and the speed of growth will redefine cities*

*Urban planners, sociologists, geographers and social scientists from all over the world work at LSE Cities, a research centre at the London School of Economics. They share a building next to the Royal Courts of Justice; at the centre of the office a fruit bowl is surrounded by jugs of water and armchairs.*

*Its director, Ricky Burdett, 63, was born in London, but grew up in the city of his mother, Rome, where he lived until to the age of 19 when he moved to University of Bristol to study architecture. Son of the American journalist Winston Burdett, famous correspondent of the CBS, and Giorgina Nathan, granddaughter of the first Jewish mayor of the Italian capital, he considers*

*London as a city "where my children have grown up exposed to the world." And although he admits that Brexit will no longer allow young people to work and travel wherever they want to in Europe, he is optimistic about the future of cities: "In the end, cities bring people together. I have not seen better alternatives to collective living anywhere in the world."*

**What is a city?**

Messy and mixed. We do not go to cities to do only one thing or just because they are clean and tidy.

**How are cities of the 21st century going to be built?**

Many are going to be unplanned and informal. Over a century ago, Le Corbusier saw the narrow streets of Paris as a source of overcrowding, ill-health, pollution and crime. Modernist planning, which shaped the 20<sup>th</sup> century city, was about cleansing and efficiency: building towers in a park and giving the ground over to the car. The car was the future. Nobody foresaw the negative consequences for the environment and segregation. We need to rethink how we plan cities in a more adaptive way.

**How is the informal in cities managed?**

That is one of the key issues of the 21st century. We can no longer afford to build the large-scale public housing we did throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century or invest in the urban infrastructure of many western cities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Much urban growth today is organic, with weak government and no regulation. In many parts of the urbanising world, no taxes are paid and there is no money to pay for basic infrastructure. Entire new districts appear without any form of regulation: no continuity or connection with the existing city.

### **What to do?**

First of all, be critical of over-determination. A highly ordered city does not easily accept change. Organic growth admits the unexpected.

### **How many buildings are built today for investment rather than for people?**

Do not over-simplify! We are in the London School of Economics, surrounded by progressive professors who study social inequality, but also hard-line economists who believe in the free market.

### **What is your position? Where are you in this debate?**

Somewhere in the middle. In most cities, the bulk of what is built is privately rather than publically owned. Buildings are investments that at the same time generate profit and shape the city. Private property is not intrinsically problematic. Problems arise when one company or individual owns too large a piece of a city. It becomes a private enclave. The vast business district of Canary Wharf in London is such a case. It was built by a Canadian developer, then passed on to different owners including UAE sovereign funds and Chinese investors. If you placed the massive Canary Wharf complex in central London, you would realise its scale but also its lack of permeability. By contrast, the Crown Estate – effectively the Queen's property portfolio – owns an equally large slice of central London. But, when you walk through the streets and alleyways, you don't know what is public and what is private: there is no gate or threshold which marks out the territory.

### **If corporate investment funds invest in cities, will citizens have to abandon them?**

No. It depends on regulation and the policies of the City Councils. New York has had rent control for decades. Vienna and Singapore own a very large proportion of housing stock. Barcelona is revisiting its policies on hotel and commercial premises. In London, a private developer who builds more than ten housing units must, by law, dedicate a percentage to affordable housing. The percentage is decided by the Mayor. The current one, Sadiq Khan, is aiming for between 30% and 50% for all new housing projects built by public or private agencies.

### **How long does a building last?**

It depends on how it was designed and built. Today, life expectancy of some buildings has dropped from several centuries to 20-40 years. The towers of the 1970s, such as the one we are in now, will be demolished and rebuilt within the next decade. I'm pretty sure about that looking around what's happening across London.

### **How do you know?**

It's a commercial building that was designed for a short life-span. The land is more valuable than the building. The materials and details – windows, cladding, services - are cheap. If you look outside at the elaborate Neo-Gothic 19th century Royal Courts of Justice – a public building in stone - I imagine it will still be there two centuries from now. Not only because of the materials with but also for the ambition with which it was designed, an expression of civic pride. The Royal Courts building has an identity; this tower is anonymous. The ability to adapt to new uses is also critical to life-span. In many Italian cities, for example, ancient amphitheatres have been re-purposed for new uses over time. They have become palaces or public spaces. Their physical structure has an innate ability to accommodate change, to rebuild the city.

### **Can layers of history be built into the contemporary city?**

The current speed of urban change works against the slow process of assimilation and layering. For example, Shanghai erected 8,000 buildings with more than 20 floors in just a few decades to accommodate millions of new residents. In 2005, the city architect told me that in his lifetime he would see several of the buildings he had just approved demolished and replaced. He knew that the

urge to provide large quantities of housing quickly, would end up in dysfunctional environments. Demolishing buildings after 20 or 30 years is clearly unsustainable.

In London, we are going through a phase of intensification with new skyscrapers transforming the historic skyline. It is a city in evolution. Paris, instead, has been unable to adapt and change because Haussmann's 19<sup>th</sup> century remodelling of the city was too powerful and perfect. You can't touch anything. London by contrast is more organic and messy and easier to adapt yet still respond to its sense of history.

**Do you need all those skyscrapers or are they purely speculative investments? Is it bad to build towers?**

No, I don't think tall buildings are intrinsically 'bad'. London is not a very dense city and can certainly absorb more buildings, some of them tall. The central business district of the City of London is building a new cluster of office towers to attract companies and keep the economy going. Elsewhere, residential towers are being built where there is good public transport. And if that serves to create jobs and provide housing - for the current generation of young adults, Uber and taxi drivers - I think that's OK.

**How do you get around London?**

On a Vespa. It takes me 8 minutes from my home to the office. With the underground, it would take 50 minutes.

**In how many cities have you lived?**

I grew up in Rome. I studied in Bristol and in 1990 my wife and I lived in Chicago for a year. Otherwise, I have lived in London.

**Did you have a Roman childhood?**

I had an international upbringing in Rome. But childhood is one thing and the experience of living and working in the city is another. I was brought up in a middle-class, relatively cosmopolitan context, which I did not reject. But I left the city at 19. Today, almost all the friends who live there find Rome suffocating. Nothing changes and nothing can change. As Paolo Sorrentino so vividly captures in his film *La Grande Bellezza*, 'beauty' has stifled the city; it has stopped in time. And that is not what a city is about. I love Italy, but I would not go to live and work in Rome even if they forced me to go after Brexit!

**You are an architect dedicated to questioning cities. Your father [Winston Burdett] was a US citizen and a communist in his early life who questioned the politics of his country and a journalist who questioned communism. Have you inherited this way of relating to the world?**

Growing up in a house where your father spends six months in Yemen and other foreign places makes you curious about other countries and cultures: India, Egypt, Israel. That idea of the global was present in my childhood. But my father was a true intellectual, not like me. If anything, I am a cultural entrepreneur, but I do not consider myself an architect because I do not design.

**What did you learn from your father?**

That you can learn much about humanity by studying Dante! My father graduated cum laude from Harvard and continued studying Romance languages at Columbia University in New York City. His first job was as a film critic. He did not have a conventional training of a journalist. He spent all his professional life as a correspondent, telling news stories to the world. I remember him reading the Encyclopaedia Britannica and Shakespeare in his bedroom ....

**On your mother's side, your great-grandfather Ernesto Nathan was the first mayor of Rome who did not belong to the local political elites.**

As mayor, my great-grandfather introduced trams and street lighting to Rome and balanced the budget! I guess I grew up with the feeling that something in my DNA had helped shape the city. I do not know to what extent that conditioned my vocation of trying to engage with cities in another way. He was a Jew and a republican working within a very strongly Catholic and conservative context. I assume that pushed him to question everything, including power. I was raised without any form of religious education. On weekends we would go out of Rome to the country and sneak into Hadrian's Villa and walk about the ruins, a visceral connection to Ancient Roman architecture.

**Does practicing architecture from a reductionist point of view help redefine cities?**

It is obvious to me that being only concerned with the form a building is not enough to understand and repair cities. Unfortunately, many architecture and planning schools in countries with huge urban problems (like India) are training professionals who do not respond to real urban problems.

**In your book 'Shaping Cities in an Urban Age' (2018) you state that 80% of the urban infrastructure in some parts of the world is yet to be built. What makes you think that investors will change their attitude to only invest in cities for profit?**

I would not dedicate myself to what I do if I did not have the optimism to think that the coexistence between the needs of the free market, sustainability and social equality is possible. What is needed is a system of government that regulates this coexistence. If you allow the free market to dictate the rules, then goodbye. But the same thing happens if you stifle creativity and entrepreneurship.

**You worked with Richard Rogers, advising Mayor Livingstone on architecture and urbanism.**

One of the major innovations of that period was the Congestion Charging for cars in central London – drivers pay to enter the city centre. The policy was copied from Singapore and many of the Mayor's advisers warned him against it. But Livingstone ignored their advice, implemented it and was re-elected. Politicians must have the courage to take decisions that will make the city progress.

**What is the relationship between banks and cities? Who regulates empty homes and rents?**

Again, it's a matter of good governance, transparency and regulation. Building requires investment. No system of financing works without trust and accountability.

**Is Europe going to become a theme park in its history?**

Over-protection can lead to mummification. But not all cities need to be preserved in aspic. Some great historic buildings have been rejuvenated by sophisticated and subtle contemporary architecture. Cities need to do the same. Copenhagen, for example, is growing and changing without becoming Disneyland. The tendency to build barriers – at any scale - only leads to introversion and fossilization.

**What can be done to make Europe, once again, a continent with a future?**

In 30 years we will have other problems and opportunities. European cities will be at the heart of this transition. President Trump worries us internationally, but his days, ultimately, are numbered. Europe's future lies in keeping our cities open and connected, to each other and the rest of the world.

**Have we reached the bottom?**

In the 30 years that I have been working on cities I have seen moments of panic and crisis and moments of rebirth and positive hope. For that you need inspired urban leaders capable of going

beyond themselves. At LSE, I teach people who are going to change the world. You can tell who's going to make it when they enter the classroom. Perhaps that's why I'm very optimistic.

Lack of understanding of difference is what stokes up fear and violence amongst people and communities. Recent terrorist attacks in cities like Paris, London, Manchester or Barcelona reflect this reality. From the point of view of the city, a mayor can turn on or off the switch to improve or worsen the situation.

### **And how to live?**

At the time of the terrorist attacks in London in 2005, the former head of London's metropolitan police force Ian Blair noted that the effectiveness of policing was totally contingent on community relations at the local neighbourhood level. I was impressed by how spatial that idea is. Confidence - or lack of trust - in the security forces, he argued, has all to do with 'mixing'. Education is family, school and street. It seems clear that tension is exacerbated in cities when one neighbourhood is occupied by only one group of people. Segregation is always going to make deeper problems worse. It is very easy to imagine the enemy: he is always on the 'other' side of the street, the wall, the barrier.

### **What ensures that cities remain mixed?**

Social housing. In the UK, there is a complex system that is highly stressed but allows different groups and constituencies to be housed in any new residential development. One of the biggest challenges is how to accommodate larger families with children - in London many large families are from a Muslim background - in such a way that they are fully integrated with the city and its services.

### **Is the smart city a new business or the future?**

It's certainly a business for five big corporate companies! The worrying thing is that many urban leaders see 'smart' as a holistic solution. I'm sceptical. LSE Cities was asked to evaluate the recent national Smart Cities Mission in India. There are cities with a million inhabitants without a toilet yet the city leaders want to invest in smart traffic lights. Yet, there are dimensions of smart technology that have a lot of democratic and social potential. Apart from the benefits of the shared economy and transport, advances in medical technology are allowing urban residents to be monitored or treated remotely (such as measuring blood pressure using a smart phone and passing the information to local clinics and doctors). That part fascinates me. New urban models should embrace these innovations. Younger generations of urban dwellers will know how to deal with it. Or, how to ignore it, which is a powerful form of action.