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❭ FUTURE SNAPSHOTS ❬ *with Anne Lise Kjaer*

URBANISATION AND THE NETWORKED SOCIETY

It's predicted that by 2050, more than 70 per cent of the world's population will live in cities. There lies a need for new urban models to resolve the social, economic and environmental challenges of such high population densities. So, how do we find a sustainable balance that instils and promotes a "good life" model for both us and our planet?

GROWING URBANISATION

Since the Industrial Revolution over 200 years ago, urbanisation has grown rapidly and we have seen the increasingly dramatic impacts of human beings on our planet. Now more than half of the world's population lives in cities, a figure that is increasing at an exponential rate, particularly in emerging economies. It is expected that most demographic growth in the next 30 years will be urban, with a constant stream of people moving to cities. According to the 2011 World Urbanisation Prospects report, Asia will account for over 55 per cent of urbanisation by 2050.

PLUS AND MINUS FACTORS

Mega-cities, with their progressively dense clusters of people, buildings and transportation systems, develop complex urban ecosystems. This poses challenges and opportunities that must be addressed holistically. Today, 20 per cent of GDP is generated in cities – hence they are often seen as attractive hubs stimulating innovation, creativity and economic development, as well as centres for self-fulfilment and cultural capitals.

However, poor living standards, poverty and unemployment – to name just a few issues – are still the sad reality for many people migrating for economic opportunity and to achieve a "good life." Last but not least, cities consume 70 per cent of global energy, so naturally we have to start here if we want to create sustainable "living models" that deliver a positive future for everyone.

NEW URBAN MODELS

Mature megacities have the potential of becoming real-time Information and Communication Technology (ICT) systems, radically changing the way we

interface with our environment. Today, ICT can act as an organic automated distribution network, with buildings, transportation, goods and services interacting and responding to people instantaneously. A "living" knowledge system is the key to tackling some of the challenges and inefficiencies inherent in infrastructures. Technology brings an exceptional opportunity to leverage lasting change in our cities. This means optimising and expanding current systems to save energy in buildings and transportation – but also getting governments, businesses and people actively involved in cultivating a better world.

CITIES ARE LIVING SYSTEMS

The physicist Geoffrey West proposes that we develop a "serious science of cities," suggesting that if most problems are generated in cities, then it is also here that we are going to find solutions. The bigger the city, the more we have of essentially everything. On the plus side, this means more creativity, innovation and culture and financial markets, as well as a concentration of education and health resources. And on the minus side, we see increased transportation and congestion, pollution,

disease, housing shortages and crime. Understanding cities as living organisms is critical for developing intelligent urban systems that talk back to us. Today's global conversations not only pose the opportunity for intelligent dialogue between citizens and local government, but also the chance to tap into community networks with people like us within our own locality.

CITIZEN-CENTRIC SYSTEMS

There are no universal solutions to the global challenges of urbanisation, as these must be solved according to

socioeconomic and cultural conditions, as well as factoring in the definition of "the good life." Tomorrow's technologically advanced building blocks are a good start, but they must be designed to be agile and scalable, to fit various stages of urban development. Clearly, no two cities face the exact same challenges and therefore we need citizen-centric models to better environmental and social conditions. Such systems must be based on transparent collaborative learning – evolving around diversity, mobility and sharing to address individual needs and dreams. Successful visionary mayors use ICT for city management, capitalising on the enormous potential it brings to cities to harmonise and talk – with better infrastructure, new business opportunities, improved civic communities and increased social capital.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

So where do we look for inspiration to create better megacities? For instance, cities in the Scandinavian region have already implemented transparent e-government models to support low corruption and build a green infrastructure to meet future demand for a carbon neutral economy. Singapore is another inspiring urbanisation model that many countries look to for best practice approaches. Green megacities across Asia are emerging, with Iskandar in Malaysia set to eclipse Singapore as a showcase for 21st century smart urban living. To make the future happen now, we must be the change we want to see in the world. In this equation, a holistic vision is the key to working together – government, businesses and citizens – all towards the same goal.