



The
Economist

The world goes to town

A special report on cities | May 5th 2007

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Also in this section

The strange allure of the slums

People prefer urban squalor to rural hopelessness. Page 5

A cul-de-sac of poverty

Successful cities need economic growth. Page 9

Thronged, creaking and filthy

Bursting cities, bust infrastructure. Page 10

Failures at the top

Lucky the city with a decent government. Page 12

In place of God

Culture replaces religion. Page 14

The reinvention test

A successful city must expect to go through several rebirths over time. Page 16

Et in suburbia ego?

With age, cities go centrifugal—but maybe not for ever. Page 17



After this year the majority of people will live in cities. Human history will ever more emphatically become urban history, says John Grimond

WHETHER you think the human story begins in a garden in Mesopotamia known as Eden, or more prosaically on the savannahs of present-day east Africa, it is clear that *Homo sapiens* did not start life as an urban creature. Man's habitat at the outset was dominated by the need to find food, and hunting and foraging were rural pursuits. Not until the end of the last ice age, around 11,000 years ago, did he start building anything that might be called a village, and by that time man had been around for about 120,000 years. It took another six millennia, to the days of classical antiquity, for cities of more than 100,000 people to develop. Even in 1800 only 3% of the world's population lived in cities. Sometime in the next few months, though, that proportion will pass the 50% mark, if it has not done so already. Wisely or not, *Homo sapiens* has become *Homo urbanus*.

In terms of human history this may seem a welcome development. It would be contentious to say that nothing of consequence has ever come out of the countryside. The wheel was presumably a rural invention. Even city-dwellers need bread as well as circuses. And if Dr Johnson and Shelley were right to say that poets are the true legislators of mankind, then all those hills and lakes and other rural delights must be given credit for inspiring them.

But the rural contribution to human progress seems slight compared with the

urban one. Cities' development is synonymous with human development. The first villages came with the emergence of agriculture and the domestication of animals: people no longer had to wander as they hunted and gathered but could instead draw together in settlements, allowing some to develop particular skills and all to live in greater safety from predators. After a while the farmers could produce surpluses, at least in good times, and the various products of the villagers—grain, meat, cloth, pots—could be exchanged. Around 2000BC metal tokens, the forerunners of coins, were produced as receipts for quantities of grain placed in granaries. Not coincidentally, cities began to take shape at about the same time.

They did so, first, in the Fertile Crescent, the sweep of productive land that ran through Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Palestine, from which Jericho, Ur, Nineveh and Babylon (pictured above) would emerge. In time came other cities in other places: Harappa and Mohenjodaro in the Indus valley, Memphis and Thebes in Egypt, Yin and Shang cities in China, Mycenae in Greece, Knossos in Crete, Ugarit in Syria and, most spectacularly, Rome, the first great metropolis, which boasted, at its zenith in the third century AD, a population of more than 1m people.

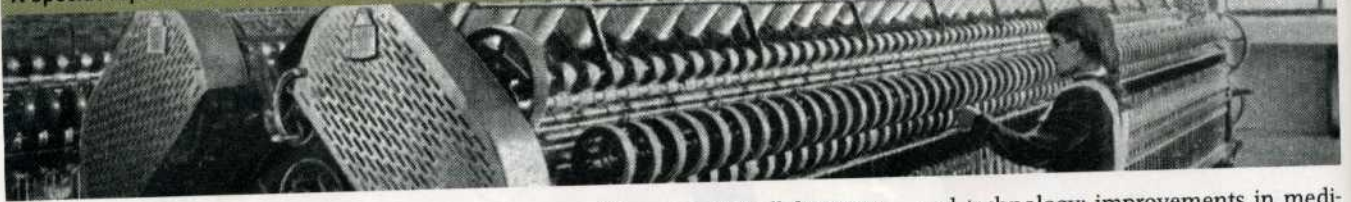
Living together meant security. But people also drew together for the practical ►►

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▶ advantages of being in a particular place: by a river or spring, on a defensible hill or peninsula, next to an estuary or other source of food. Also important, argue historians, was a settlement's capacity to draw people to it as a meeting-place, often for sacred or spiritual purposes. Graves, groves, even caves might become shrines or places for ceremonies and rituals, to which people would make a pilgrimage. Man did not live by bread alone.

But bread, in the broadest sense, was important. People came to cities not just to worship but to trade—the shrine was often the market, too—and the goods they bought and sold were not just farm products but the manufactures of urban artisans and skilled workers. The city became a centre of exchange, both of goods and of ideas, and so it also became a centre of learning, innovation and sophistication.

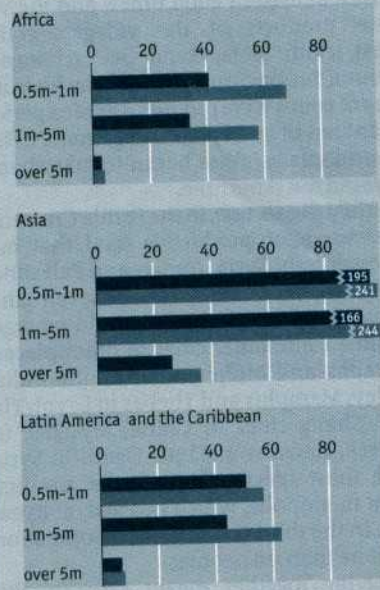
This was so not just in the Fertile Crescent but, over the centuries, in Alexandria and Amsterdam, Cambay and Constantinople, London and Lisbon, Teotihuacán and Tenochtitlán. It was in the city that man was liberated from the tyranny of the soil and could develop skills, learn from other people, study, teach and develop the social arts that made country folk seem bumpkins. *Homo urbanus* did not just live in a town: he was urbane.

Cities were much more than all of this,

More cities

Number of cities by population

■ 2000 ■ 2015



Source: UN-Habitat

of course, and they were not all the same. As they developed, some were most notable for their religious role (latter-day Rome), as the hub of an empire (Constantinople, Vijayanagara), as centres of administration (Beijing), political development (Florence), learning (Bologna, Fez), commerce (Hamburg) or a special product (Toledo). Some flourished, some died, their longevity depending on factors as varied as conquest, plague, misgovernment or economic collapse.

Technology turns even-handed

Whatever the particular circumstances of a city, though, its vigour was likely to be affected by technological change. Just as it was improvements in farming that brought about the surpluses that made possible the first fixed settlements, so it was improvements in transport that made possible the development of trade on which the prosperity of so many cities depended. Other technological changes made it possible to survive in a city. The Romans, for instance, constructed aqueducts to bring fresh water to their towns and sewers to provide sanitation.

But only the rich benefited. Most Romans, and many city-dwellers throughout history, lived in squalor, and many died of it. Towns were crowded and insanitary; people were often malnourished; and disease spread fast. Though cities grew in size and number for long periods, they could decline and fall, too. Between 1000 and 1300 Europe's urban population more than doubled, to about 70m (thanks partly to a new system of crop rotation, made possible by better tools). Then, with the Black Death, it fell by a quarter. Country people died too, but the city-dwellers were especially vulnerable. Their health depended above all on clean water and sanitation, which few had, and cheap soap and medicines, which had yet to be invented.

Not surprisingly, the next big change in the development of the city also turned on a leap in technology: the invention of engines and manufacturing machinery. The Industrial Revolution did nothing at first to make urban life easier, but it did provide jobs—lots of them. With the new factories of the industrial age that began in the late 18th century was born an entirely new urban era. Peasants left the land in their multitudes to live in new cities, first in the north of England, then all over Europe and North America. By 1900, 13% of the world's population had become urban.

The latest leap, from 13% to 50% in just 107 years, also owes something to science

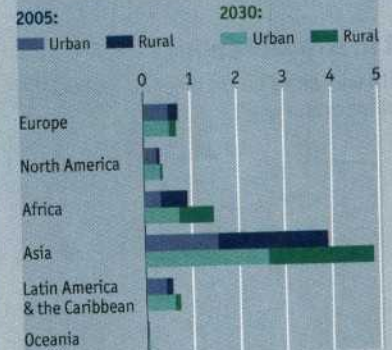
and technology: improvements in medicine, coupled with new knowledge about ways to avoid disease, have enabled more and more people to live together without succumbing as once they did to diarrhoea, tuberculosis, cholera and other pestilences. The same developments, however, have similarly lengthened lives in the countryside, leading to a huge increase in rural population. Human ingenuity has not matched this increase with commensurate growth in rural prosperity. As a result, ever more villagers have been upping sticks to seek a better life in the city.

The sheer scale and speed of the current urban expansion make it unlike any of the big changes that have punctuated urban history. It mostly consists of poor people migrating in unprecedented numbers, and then producing babies on a similarly unprecedented scale. It is thus largely a phenomenon of poor and middle-income countries; the rich world has put most of its urbanisation behind it.

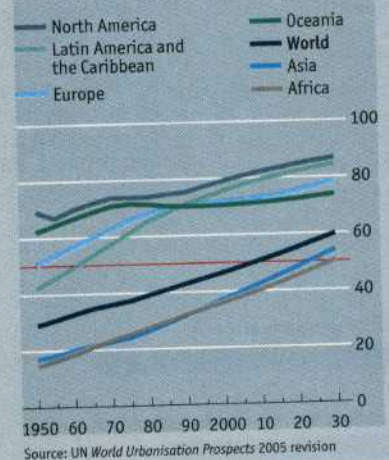
In poor countries, though, the trend is ▶

More city-dominance

Urban and rural population by region, bn



Urban population by region, %



Source: UN World Urbanisation Prospects 2005 revision



set to continue. The United Nations forecasts that today's urban population of 3.2 billion will rise to nearly 5 billion by 2030, when three out of five people will live in cities. The increase will be most dramatic in the poorest and least-urbanised continents, Asia and Africa. They are the ones least able to cope. Already over 90% of the urban population of Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda, three of the world's most rural countries, live in slums.

Within ten years the world will have nearly 500 cities of more than 1m people. Most of the newcomers will be absorbed in a metropolis of up to 5m people. But some will live in a megacity, defined as home to 10m or more inhabitants. In 1950 only New York and Tokyo could claim to be as big, but by 2020, says the UN, nine cities—Delhi, Dhaka, Jakarta, Lagos, Mexico City, Mumbai, New York, São Paulo and Tokyo—will have more than 20m inhabitants. Greater Tokyo already has 35m, more than the entire population of Canada.

The Megalopolis of the ancient world was in Arcadia, a part of Greece cited by Virgil as a model of happy, rural simplic-

ity. The cities that now go by that generic name are far from Arcadian. Successful these places may be, if success is measured by growth of population. But most are in poor countries and many, if not most, of their inhabitants live in slums.

In the rich world, though, the city is undergoing very different changes. Many of the new towns that flourished in the Industrial Revolution and the manufacturing era that followed have been losing population. Even New York, for so long the epitome of urban sophistication, went through a bad patch in the 1970s. Some cities retain their role as administrative centres, by virtue of their political status. Some are still trading hubs, by virtue of their geographical position. Some endure simply because they have reached an equilibrium. But others struggle.

Of the traditional reasons for urban living, several (the presence of the shrine, the proximity of food) have lost their importance. Some of what the city provided (shops, factories) can now be offered in suburban malls or industrial parks—or in low-cost urban rivals in the developing

world. Security, once one of the main reasons for huddling together, is often now more elusive in the druggy streets of the metropolis than in the exurbs. And technology, which has usually favoured urban progress, now enables people to work in rural bliss on home computers. No wonder so many cities find that in order to flourish they have to reinvent themselves.

Nearly all rich-country cities, whether prospering or declining, worry about transport, pollution, energy, pockets of poverty and so on. These offer troubles aplenty. But they are of a different order to those faced by poor-country cities, whose problems are vastly greater and resources vastly smaller. While rich cities fret over a relatively modest ebb and flow of population, poor cities must cope with a tidal wave of migrants.

So the history of the city has come to a fork. This report will explore the diverging paths of rich and poor, and the prospects for the city if the developing world can one day clamber out of poverty. First, though, it looks at the urban reality awaiting the Dick Whittingtons of the 21st century. ■

The strange allure of the slums

People prefer urban squalor to rural hopelessness

NO CONTINENT is urbanising faster than Africa. Why? One answer is partly statistical: Africa has been the slowest to get started. Another is that parts of Africa, such as the Sahel, have been affected recently by severe climate change, making marginal land unfarmable. And in countries like Angola and Congo years of fighting have propelled millions to the cities. But a fuller explanation is needed. A look at Nairobi provides some answers, and throws up more questions.

For many years the biggest city in east Africa, where human life seems to have begun, was not a bad advertisement for the urban condition. As the capital of Kenya, Nairobi had the subdued bustle of an administrative centre, some industry, hotels for tourists on their way to or from wildlife safaris, lots of greenery and even a small forest. The population in 1960 was about 250,000. Today the forest remains, but, with 3m people, Nairobi has lost much of its charm. The traffic is awful, as is the crime, and the superlatives are usually reserved for Kibera, which is supposedly

Africa's largest, densest and poorest slum.

It probably is not. Luanda, Kinshasa and Lagos, the world's fastest-growing megacity, may all have slums to match Kibera, whose population is put at anything from 600,000 to 1.2m, depending both on the estimator and on the time of year, many of its inhabitants being seasonal migrants. What makes Kibera unusual is, first, that its 256 hectares (630 acres) sit right in the middle of Nairobi and, second, that it finds itself on the doorstep of Habitat, the UN's agency for towns and cities, which is based in a campus of bucolic tranquillity not far away. Accordingly, Kibera gets no end of attention from outsiders, whether governments throwing money at it, NGOs engaged in mapping and studying it, or film stars shooting "The Constant Gardener". Ban Ki-moon paid it a visit within a month of becoming the UN's secretary-general this year.

Most of what makes Kibera interesting, though, is what it shares with other African slums. The density (shacks packed so tightly that many are accessible only on

foot); the dust (in the dry seasons) and the mud (when it rains); the squalor (you often have to pick your way through streams of black ooze); the hazards (low eaves of jagged corrugated iron); and the litter, especially the plastic (Kibera's women, lacking sanitation and fearing robbery or rape if they risk the unlit pathways to the latrines, resort at night to the "flying toilet", a polythene bag to be cast from their doorway, much as chamber pots were emptied into the street below in pre-plumbing Edinburgh). Most striking of all, to those inured to the sight of such places through photography, is the smell. With piles of human faeces littering the ground and sewage running freely, the stench is ever-present.

Not much, but it's home

Striking, too, though, is the apparent contentment with which the inhabitants accept their lot. It falls short of cheerfulness: tension is constant in Kibera, and small incidents can quickly turn nasty. But most people are busy getting on with life. Churches abound, and schools too. Chil- ▶▶



► dren play in the dirt or on the railway tracks that bisect the slum. Stall-holders sell their goods. Men, ragged or smartly dressed in dark suits, clean their teeth wherever they can spit.

Indoors, things can be more wretched. On the northern slope of the area known as Soweto East, Josephine Kadenyi lives in a shack three metres square (ten feet by ten feet). It consists of one room, with a curtain dividing it. It has no electricity and no sanitation. Outside is a vast heap of litter and plastic bags used by children as a lavatory. Just below that, 14 thin water pipes emerge from the ground, bound with sticky tape in a half-successful effort to stem the leaks. Sewage runs alongside. Mrs Kadenyi makes her living by selling uncontaminated water and looking after the disabled child of a neighbour.

In NGO-speak, Kibera is an "informal" settlement. That means it does not officially exist. The government provides nothing. If there are schools or latrines or washrooms, they are privately run (it costs three shillings, about four American cents, to use the latrine). The government provides no basic services, no schools, no hospital, no clinics, no running water, no lavatories. It does, however, own nearly all the land, so if you want to put up a shack, you must go to the chief, a civil servant in the provincial government, and get his permission. For a consideration, perhaps 5,000 shillings (about \$70), this can be obtained, but you receive no piece of paper, merely an oral consent.

Most shacks are in fact owned by "landlords", some of them descended from Nubians rewarded by the British for their mili-

tary service in the first world war with the right of abode in Kibera. They now jostle with others who have established, through custom, corruption or force, the right to put up a "unit". These are then rented out to tenants, who have no rights of any kind. The cost of erecting a shack is recouped within a year or two.

Daniel arap Moi, who served as president of Kenya from 1978 to 2002, has long owned a house that abuts Kibera. Like almost all other ministers of his as well as the present government, he does his best to ignore the slum next door. Kenyan politicians seldom if ever visit it, or indeed the 200 or so smaller "informal settlements" in Nairobi, even though 60% of the capital's population live in these slums. Several politicians are, however, reputed to be landlords, as are many civil servants and other local worthies.

Why does the government not bulldoze Kibera and rehouse everyone in multi-storey flats on the same site? Oh, that would be very complicated, the questioner is told. The difficulties abound, apparently, and they are not all financial. The real reason is that lots of people make lots of money from the slums, providing the services the state does not provide and extracting the bribes that anyone living in an illegal city has to pay just to survive. Moreover, the slums provide the cheap labour that enables the city to operate. The status quo suits the authorities quite nicely.

And what about the people who live in Kibera? Strangely, it suits them too, up to a point anyway. Asked whether she wouldn't prefer to go back to the village in western Kenya that she left six years ago, Mrs Kadenyi says, "Yes, of course. But what would I do back home?" What indeed? Kenya's average rate of population growth for the past 30 years has been over 3% a year, putting enormous pressure on the land. With mouths to feed and no prospect of a job in the countryside, the rural poor head for the cities. There at least they have some hope of employment.

Hope is all it is for most of them, at least in the formal economy. But hope is what keeps them in places like Kibera. It may be a dump, but it is central. This means that anyone lucky enough to have a job, either in the offices or houses of the city, or in the industrial area nearby, can walk to work. Those who have to peddle goods or search for casual labour are equally well placed. Being able to avoid a time-consuming and expensive commute is a great benefit.

Still, centrality does not have to mean squalor. In many cities the slums are on

the outskirts, by the airport or somewhere out of sight. But the people of Kibera are suspicious of efforts to improve their housing. In the 1980s they saw some of their land taken for new flats, 400 in all. No one in Kibera benefited, says Raphael Handa, a clergyman who heads a community committee set up with support from Habitat and the government; all the tenants were brought in from outside.

Same story in Mumbai

The people of Kibera are increasingly organised, and increasingly determined to be involved in any plans to spruce up their slum. In this they are typical of their counterparts elsewhere. But in other respects, do Africa's new cities, slums and slum-dwellers resemble those in other continents? An ocean away, Mumbai offers plenty of parallels.

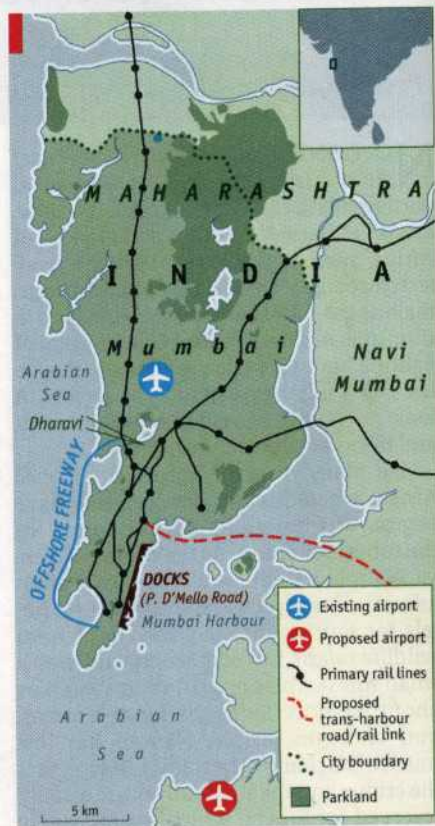
Between 14m and 18m people live in Mumbai, according to where you draw the city limits, maybe half of them in slums. That is about the same proportion as in Nairobi. But as you drive in from the airport or along P. D'Mello Road by the port, you quickly see that these slums are classy. Many of the shacks on the pavements are double-decked, and beds, chairs, goats and

Squashed in squalor

Urban population living in slums
% of total, 2005



Source: UN-Habitat





▶ children spill on to the street, where head-carriers—porters with straight backs—wash themselves from buckets.

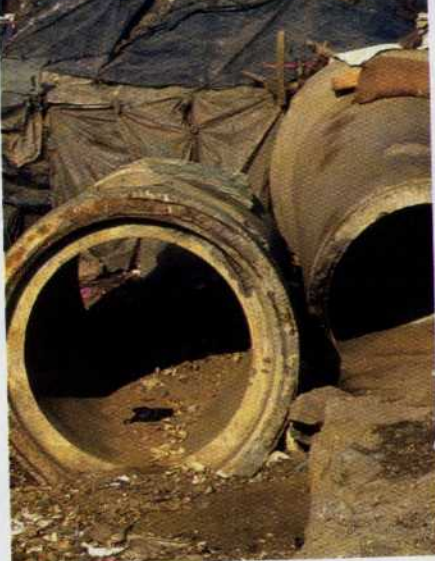
The peninsula of modern Mumbai was, 350 years ago, seven islands, which have gradually been joined and expanded by landfills to make up 65 square kilometres of land shaped a bit like a chilli pepper. The city is hot in every sense but, more seriously, it is crowded, and room for expansion is limited. Until 60 years ago newcomers to Mumbai tended to settle just outside, at Dharavi, where no rules applied and so sheep could be slaughtered and hides tanned. Over the years ever more people came and squatted, and the city, India's financial and commercial capital, expanded. Today about 600,000 people live in Dharavi's 210 hectares, which now lie in the heart of Mumbai. Dharavi's boast is that it is the biggest slum in Asia.

Conditions here are similar to Kibera's: miserable housing, no security of tenure, contaminated water for the 40% lucky enough to have it piped, mud for four months out of 12, bribes needed for a blind eye to be turned to an illegal electricity connection, one lavatory for 800 people, the stink of sewage, and so on.

People come here for familiar reasons, too. Life is grindingly hard for many rural Indians. Agriculture has recently been growing at only 2% a year, while the economy as a whole booms at over 8%. Crops fail, and many farmers are so deeply in debt that they are little more than bonded labourers. Suicide is common: in just one region of Maharashtra, the state of which Mumbai is the capital, 1,450 farmers killed themselves last year. In particular, many *dalits*, members of the lowest Hindu caste, see no hope of betterment amid the harsh conservatism of rural India. Their only hope is to move to the cities. It is an echo of what happened in medieval Europe, when moving to a city was for many an escape from serfdom. *Stadtluft macht frei* (City air sees you free), said the Germans.

Beats commuting, too

Life may indeed be a bit easier in a city. Jockin Arputham, who has lived in Mumbai's slums since 1963, when he was 16, makes Dharavi sound almost romantic. "You don't have to work very hard to make a living," he says. "You can collect and sell garbage. You can always ask people for food, and to sleep somewhere." He made his bed on someone's verandah for 12 years. Then he founded an organisation for the inhabitants of India's slums. Now he is also head of the international federa-



Even Diogenes would despair

tion of shack- and slum-dwellers.

People in Dharavi look cheerful. Everyone is busy and many are reasonably well off. Some live in flats and own television sets and other electronic gadgets. Among slum-dwellers they are fortunate, for, like Kibera, Dharavi is central, close not just to the diamond market and the financial centre but also the airport, beyond which most Mumbaikars live. Many therefore spend hours getting to and from work. About 7m commuters make their journey to and from the bottom of the peninsula each day. The roads are jammed and the trains overflowing: 700 passengers are crammed into (or clinging onto) carriages meant for 120. About 3,000 people are killed on the tracks each year.

Some people from the slums have been happily resettled farther out but close to a railway, which gives them ready access to their work. Others are benefiting from the citizens' groups that have taken root. Mr Arputham's National Slum-Dwellers Association, for instance, is allied to a co-operative through which some 250,000 people, nearly all of them women, regularly put money aside for their common good. And governments, donors and international agencies find the two organisations to be reliable partners if they want to improve slum life.

Mr Arputham got involved in community action in 1975, when the authorities decided to clear the slum in which he lived to make way for the Atomic Energy Department. He failed to stop the evictions, but learnt that people affected by such clearance schemes had to organise if they

were to have any influence. Plain confrontation is much less successful, says Celine d'Cruz, who works with Mumbai's pavement-dwellers, than informed argument, backed by statistics, surveys and the involvement of lots of potential victims.

Thanks to the efforts of such groups and consequent changes in the law, there are fewer evictions nowadays. The controversies, instead, surround efforts to improve the slums. The idea now in vogue is to bring in a developer, let him put up multi-storey buildings, use some of the flats to rehouse those living on the site and sell others at a profit. Slum-dwellers often have enough money to pay rent, and such deals remove a financial burden from the local authority or landlord.

But the scheme is controversial. Some slum-dwellers are too poor to pay even a service charge, which will be levied in return for water and the use of a lift, even if the flats are rent-free. Others complain that only those who were resident before 1995 will be eligible for rehousing, leaving newer arrivals with nowhere to go. Mr Arputham, who is not against development, says the chosen developer has no plans for a sewer and will undoubtedly make 25,000 families homeless.

Others worry that such schemes will allow corrupt officials and corrupt developers to make huge fortunes at the expense of the poor. Under the headline "Mumbai's great slum robbery", the *Hindustan Times* recently published details of a police investigation involving, it was claimed, pay-offs to officials to free the builders' hands. Shirish Patel, a civil engineer with a long-standing concern for planning the city, believes that there are simply too many people in Dharavi to allow a developer to rehouse everyone and at the same time make an honest profit.

More generally, he believes that both government and developers have a strong interest in keeping property prices high—and Mumbai's rank among the highest in the world. Vijay Mahajan, of Bombay First, a businessmen's group formed to promote and improve the city, agrees. The higher the prices, the more builders can charge. As for the politicians, they profit from an invisible line that runs directly from slumlord to local politician to state minister to his boss. Money runs up along this line, and so do votes. In return, the government lets the slums remain undemolished. It is a pay-and-stay arrangement.

Nairobi and Mumbai certainly have lots in common. Luckily, other places have fared better. The outlook is not all bleak. ■



A cul-de-sac of poverty

Successful cities need economic growth

THE English men and women who fled their farms and villages in the late 18th century to seek a better life in the factories of burgeoning Manchester, Leeds and Bradford found no streets paved with gold. Rather, they encountered disease, malnutrition and often brutality. In his book "The City", Joel Kotkin cites the West Indian slave-holder who, on a visit to Bradford, could not believe that anyone could "be so cruel as to require a child of nine to work 12½ hours a day." Yet by 1850, says Mr Kotkin, this time quoting Alexis de Tocqueville, there was in Britain "at every step... something to make the tourist's heart leap." Social activists and enlightened professionals had brought about legislative reforms; and the benefits of mechanisation, plus wages pushed up by trade unions, had enabled the poor to start buying the sort of cheap goods they were helping to make. Cities now seemed almost heroic. Can today's urban poor expect to see a similar transformation?

In many places, such as India, says Eduardo Lopez-Moreno, head of the UN's Global Urban Observatory, new migrants to the towns are no better off than they were in the country. And in poorer nations generally the proportion of urban poor is actually increasing faster than the rate of urbanisation. But the hope that keeps poor people in cities is not always vain. Asia shows that even a region in which 40% of the inhabitants already live in cities, and which is urbanising almost as fast as Africa, is not condemned to misery for ever.

In the early 1970s over half of Asians were poor; they could expect to live, on average, to an age of only 48 years; and two-fifths of adults were illiterate. Today the proportion of poor people is about a quarter, life expectancy has risen to 69 years, and about 70% can read and write. That does not mean that everyone has benefited. Far from it: Asia still accounts for two-thirds of the world's poor, of whom 250m are in cities. But even the urban poor of South Asia, who have been largely bypassed by the growth that has lifted East Asia, have reason to hope for better times.

Not much of it is coming the way it did in the 19th century, though. It is true that activists and donors are beginning to take

an interest in cities, and ideas are now circulating about upgrading slums and attacking urban poverty. Some of these concern the problems of illegal squatting, which are now well known. With no title to your shack you have no incentive to improve it, no way to insure it, no collateral with which to secure a loan, no address with which to become an official citizen, let alone to open a bank account: you are locked in poverty. Yet there is money in slums, and enterprise—and numbers.

Getting it together

Many ideas to unlock the enterprise turn on using the numbers. This can be done, say, by encouraging a majority of the local residents to form a savings group or a co-operative and ask the municipality to grant collective development rights, some of which may be used in the slum and some sold off. Other community groups, under a suitable leader, may be able to negotiate with a commercial lender and then hire a project manager to oversee the rehousing of several people. Or a group of co-ops may hire a financial intermediary.

A more top-down approach is to ask governments to issue land certificates indicating a range of personal rights rather than strict title deeds. This has worked well on a small scale in a dozen African countries. Vietnam has successfully brought in the concept of private leasehold. Other schemes involve a donor accepting the responsibility of upgrading a slum in return for a sovereign debt.

All these ideas have their merits and should be copied more widely. But the main conclusion to be drawn from the success stories is that few poor people in cities will grow richer if their local economy is not growing, and few local economies will prosper if the national economy is not also prospering. Cities often play a disproportionate role in the national economy. Mumbai accounts for 40% of India's tax revenues, for example; Tokyo accounts for a third of Japan's GDP; and over three-quarters of Senegal's industrial production comes from around Dakar. In absolute terms, too, cities can be huge wealth creators. Seoul's economy equalled the whole of Argentina's in the late 1990s, and

Mexico City's equalled that of Thailand.

This is not to say that all cities will prosper in step with each other, or with the nation as a whole. In both rich and poor countries, some cities may flourish as others decline. Several metropolitan areas in America's Great Lakes region—never mind the cities at their heart, such as Buffalo, Cleveland and Pittsburgh—have long been losing inhabitants, their population is ageing and income growth has lagged behind rivals in other parts of the country.

Even Mumbai's economy, successful though it seems, has been growing less fast than the economies of such places as Bengaluru (Bangalore), Chennai and Hyderabad. Indeed, in 2003 Mumbai's growth rate was behind Maharashtra's, which was behind India's. Sanjay Ubale, the state official in charge of co-ordinating all the plans to develop the city, says that \$10 billion of public and private money is being spent on infrastructure projects. That will be welcome, but surely not enough if Mumbai is to realise its ambition to overtake Hong Kong and Singapore as a financial centre, and to become a "world-class city".

In some respects cities compete with each other, even across borders. Fierce competition now takes place within India to win, say, a new BMW plant or a Nokia special economic zone. Similarly, Hong Kong and Shanghai vie to call themselves China's financial capital, just as New York and London vie for the world title. The busiest stock exchange may mean the lion's share of the market in financial services, and the jobs that go with it.

In general, though, one city's success does not mean another's failure. Only when they are competing for finite resources or a specific prize, an investment or the Olympic games, say, does one city stand to gain at another's expense. Most cities must therefore hope that they can benefit from a sound national economic policy. Even in an expanding economy, the benefits of growth do not always trickle down to the slums very fast. That is why other policies are needed, too. But in places where growth has been negative, notably Africa, it is well nigh impossible to eradicate slums. Even so, life for the urban poor can be improved. ■



Thronged, creaking and filthy

Bursting cities, bust infrastructure

IT IS hard to say exactly what makes for a successful city. Some can be polluted and alive, others spotless and sterile. Still, no one wants to live in a city that is impossibly congested, suffers constant blackouts and frequent floods, chops down its trees, concretes over its parks, has awful schools and hospitals, is devoid of any buildings of charm or character and is governed by corrupt politicians and incompetent civil servants. Yet many people have to.

Transport can sometimes define the form of a city, as river traffic helped shape Tudor London's Thames-side expansion, and the freeways that replaced the old light railways of Los Angeles are both the arteries and the bone structure of the modern city. Transport, too, is often the most obvious of a city's shortcomings. From Beijing to Tehran to São Paulo, streets are choked with traffic and pedestrians are choking with fumes.

The solution to this is clear: good public transport. In some places that is recognised. In southern Brazil, Curitiba, the capital of Paraná state, has been trying to keep its transport system abreast of an expanding city's needs since the 1940s, when the town got its first urban plan. In the 1970s a busy commercial street was pedestrianised—a first for Brazil—and elsewhere buses and local traffic were made to run down the centre of broad roads while faster traffic whizzed one way down either side. In the 1980s the city went increasingly green, creating parks, extending the transport system and bringing in multi-carriage buses. The transport authority collected the fares and paid the bus operator. Curitiba's buses achieved average speeds above 20kph, carrying 12,000 passengers at peak hours. Rail transport generally does better, but the buses were popular and cheap (though they have recently been losing market share).

Other Brazilian cities have copied Curitiba, but without much success. Their failure is blamed on the imperfections of democracy: the Curitiba reforms were pushed through with military backing during a dictatorship that ended in 1985, since when other cities' efforts have been stymied by the lobbying of the affected bus companies. This has always ensured

that some crucial element of the scheme was missing. Yet in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, and Bogotá, that of Colombia, the Curitiba bus system has worked well, and it has been copied successfully from Jakarta to Brisbane and Ottawa to Rouen.

In most other places, though, people who can afford cars seem to prefer them. Public transport is often slow, unreliable and unpleasant. Edward Glaeser, of Harvard University, reckons that the average American commuter's journey takes 48 minutes by public transport but only 24 minutes by car. No wonder so many Americans drive to work. In Tehran petrol is heavily subsidised, so taxis are cheap, and the new metro is still far from complete. Karachi is probably the biggest city in the world without a rail network of any kind, and the buses are overloaded. Those who have the option mostly drive.

Probably the only way to get people out of their cars is to hit their pockets. Singapore was the first city to introduce road charges, in 1975. London and Oslo have followed suit (Stockholm will join them), with some success in reducing traffic. But punitive charges will work only if the displaced drivers can switch to a decent public transport system. Often they cannot.

Some cities are trying to build rail systems, but many seem, even so, to be doomed to reliance on buses. Manila's new railway carries only 8% of the traffic; Bangkok's smart new sky train and metro only 3%; and Kolkata's metro even less. Happy the people of Copenhagen, two-fifths of whom bicycle to work.

A half-way house for many is a scooter or motorbike. Yet even these are under threat. Guangzhou, the richest city in mainland China and therefore a magnet for migrants, has recently banned mopeds and motorbikes, supposedly to reduce congestion and crime but in reality to discourage job-seeking incomers. Neither objective is likely to be achieved.

A greater folly, however, can be seen in those Chinese cities that are responding to clogged roads by building carriageways one above the other. Such places would do better to emulate Seoul, whose last mayor tore down an elevated freeway in the middle of the city and thus restored to view a

long-buried river seen by the locals as a source of spiritual life. That, and his improvements to the public-transport system, have done wonders for his popularity. He now hopes to become president.

Dirty water, fetid air

Cities can be great levellers: congested streets and immobile trains hit rich and poor alike. Similarly, when Hurricane Katrina swept across America's Gulf coast on August 29th 2005, deluging New Orleans and making more than 1m people homeless, the world realised that nature could smite a rich country as easily as a poor one.

An equally sobering lesson, though, had come just a month earlier, on July 26th, when 994mm (over three feet) of rain had fallen in 24 hours on Mumbai. A third of the city was submerged, hundreds of people lost their lives and thousands of homes were destroyed. The two events should give pause for thought, for the new urge to urbanise has been matched not just by global warming but by another mass movement: a dash for the coast.



Green exercise machines



Two-fifths of the world's cities of 1m-10m people, and 15 of the world's 20 megacities, lie on or near a coast, where many are at risk from flooding. Their vulnerability is likely to increase. London built a barrier in the 1980s to save it from the floods that occasionally saturated parts of the city when high tides and storms coincided. The barrier was raised only 27 times between 1986 and 1996. In the next ten years it went up 66 times. Forecasters say that, thanks to the rising sea level, it will go up and down ever more frequently, and may be overwhelmed by 2030.

In most cities, rich or poor, it is the less well off who are most at risk from floods and natural disasters. It was the poor of New Orleans, nearly a third of the population, who lived in the lowest-lying parts of the city and suffered most from Katrina's wrath. Similarly, it was the urban poor of Honduras and its neighbours who were smitten hardest by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. And it is the people of the slums more widely in Latin America who are most vulnerable: floods often sweep through the *favelas* of São Paulo, half of which stand on river banks.

In some places too little water, not too much, is the problem. China's thirst for industry and irrigation has combined with climate change to drain the aquifers, some of which hold fossil water that has lain undisturbed for millennia. Droughts seem to be ever more frequent in northern China, and southern cities such as Guangzhou are also affected. Rivers are drying up: the Yellow river now flows to the sea for only a few weeks a year. And the rain, when it comes, is intensely acid. To make matters worse, the glaciers on which both China and India partly depend are melting. Any benefits from extra water supplies will be short-term, and vitiated by floods.

No wonder water is expensive, especially for the poor. Those slum-dwellers who buy their water by the litre, whether they live in Kibera, Dharavi or a Brazilian *favela*, will pay more for it than their neighbours in richer districts who get it from a tap. And the water that flushes sewers is literally beyond them (in Dharavi it is actually below them: a sewer lies under the slum, but no one can afford a connection).

Only three-fifths of the people of Shanghai live in buildings connected to a sewer, and barely 3% of the inhabitants of Jakarta have access to the main drains. Most cities in the developing world discharge their sewage untreated into rivers or the sea. Delhi draws three-quarters of its drinking water from the Yamuna river,



An ever-more-regular event

into which the city dumps quantities of sewage, almost all of it untreated, to join a cocktail of farm chemicals and industrial effluents, including arsenic.

Human ingenuity allows some people to make use of pollution. Waves of gleaners sift the sweepings of Hanoi's streets, just as children pick over the rubbish of Maputo's main tip. Every city in Asia and Latin America has an industry based on gathering up old cardboard boxes. Recycling in Mumbai is so sophisticated that the guts of dead animals are said to be collected and turned into medical sutures.

But most pollution has a cost. Dirty air, says the UN, causes the premature death of 400,000 Chinese each year. The diseases caused or carried by contaminated water kill children the world over in huge numbers. Solid rubbish is also bad for you when you literally live on top of it, as do the people of Korogocho, a Nairobi slum. And even recycling can be lethal. In China and India the destitute dismantlers of computers and electronic goods, many of which are shipped from rich countries, are often exposed to toxins.

With people pouring into the cities and cars pouring on to the roads—only 1% of Chinese own a car as yet—and with richer countries exporting many of their most polluting industries, the outlook for the environment looks grim. Yet some places have done better than others.

Bangkok provides an example of how

to reduce air pollution. Fifteen years ago it was a byword for foul air, a city where the traffic stood still and anyone tempted to resort to a *tuk-tuk*, the local version of the Indian open-sided auto-rickshaw, risked asphyxiation. It was much like Beijing, São Paulo or Mexico City, where views are usually seen only in pictures and the atmosphere can be cut with a knife.

In Bangkok, though, a group of city officials, with notably little support from a succession of ephemeral governments, has reduced the air-pollution levels by 20-50%, depending on the measure, despite an increase in vehicles of 40% in the past ten years alone. They have done so by imposing fiercer pollution controls on cars, raising taxes on two-stroke motorbikes and making all taxis run on (subsidised) liquefied natural gas.

Natural gas has also benefited Delhi, whose air has become significantly fresher since 2002, when the Supreme Court ordered its buses to convert to gas. Delhi's air is today half as polluted as it was in 1994, and recent figures suggest that Beijing's is now dirtier. China as a whole has 16 of the world's 20 most polluted cities. But the country is starting, with varying degrees of urgency, to realise that green investment often makes sense. First, it is coming to see that the costs of inaction are huge: the UN believes environmental degradation robs the country of 12% of potential GDP. Second, it is increasingly persuaded that spending may pay off. The World Bank estimates, for example, that the \$3.15 billion spent in China on flood control since the 1960s has averted losses of \$12 billion.

In any event, China now proudly points to developments like Dongtan, just north of Shanghai, which is designed to be the world's first sustainable city. The





► claims for it may be extravagant: the city will, it is said, be self-sufficient in energy and water, green with parks, silent with electric cars and utterly in harmony with nature. But the ambitions are laudable.

In other parts of China, too, signs of sensitivity to the environment are growing. Shanghai, Chongqing, Fatou and Xian joined with their collaborator, Denmark, to show off a series of urban innovations at the Venice architecture Biennale last year. Shenzhen, whose extraordinary economic boom has been partly built on contempt for the environment, is now re-

garded within China as a place not to emulate. And even in much smaller cities a new environmentalism is on display: in Riluli, a free-and-easy way station on the Myanmar border, solar panels are sold almost as commonly as sex.

Richer countries are experimenting in other ways. Some cities are encouraging green buildings. Melbourne's council has commissioned "a landmark ecologically sustainable building" air-conditioned by a natural "breathing system", which draws in cool air at night to flush out the previous day's heat, and uses vegetation to filter out-

side air. Chicago's mayor has put a green roof on city hall—a miniature expanse of prairie that soaks up water and absorbs heat. And Abu Dhabi, anticipating the world after oil, is investing in a huge solar-power project, part of a scheme to turn the city into a green-energy pioneer.

All this suggests that the filthy cities of the urbanising world can, and will, clean themselves up, just as the squalid cities of the rich world have done. But they cannot do so alone. In this, as in most urban matters, a collaborative national government is essential, and international help, too. ■

Failures at the top

Lucky the city with a decent government

NOT all happy cities resemble one another, but each unhappy city is at least partly unhappy for a single reason: misgovernment. The quality of government, local and national, is the most important factor, apart from the economy, in the success of a city.

The failure of American governments at all levels both to prepare for and to respond to Hurricane Katrina has been widely noted. Less noted, though just as shocking, was the abject failure of Indian state and local officials before and after Mumbai's flooding. The cleansing of Bangkok's polluted air showed that governments can take action if they want to. But even there the politicians were supine, and the initiatives were taken by determined bureaucrats in spite of their political masters' passivity.

One feature common to most of the spilling-out-all-over cities of the developing world is a huge difference in wealth between the slum-dwellers at the bottom and the rich at the top. In virtually every misgoverned city, which is probably most of them, the politicians in power are among the rich. Any well-governed city is likely to have an honest administration.

So it should be no surprise that the mayor of Curitiba, Jaime Lerner, though he was first appointed by a military regime, was later elected as mayor, and went on to be twice elected governor of Paraná. He got things done, and most of them were for the benefit of rich and poor alike: he cajoled the poor to clear their slums of rubbish by rewarding them with bags of groceries; he persuaded fishermen to clean up

a nearby polluted bay for a small fraction of the cost of having it done professionally; he created parks and encouraged shops and other sponsors to take responsibility for local orphans. As mayor of Bogotá ten years ago, Enrique Peñalosa also won popularity by similarly fostering greenery and bicycle paths, and by getting people out of cars and on to buses.

In rich countries, too, the well-gov-

erned cities stand out. Chicago is a rustbelt town whose economic base was manufacturing, an activity that has all but run out of puff in the old industrial heartland of America. In the 1980s Chicago lost companies, jobs and people, and seemed destined to languish in gradual decline in much the same way as Cleveland, Detroit and Pittsburgh. But energetic government led by a mayor, Richard Daley, whose ambitions start and end in his home town, has turned the city round. Having greened the streets with flowers and trees, taken over Chicago's intractable public housing and then set about reforming the school system, his administration has helped breathe new life into a moribund metropolis. He was re-elected in February for a sixth term, with 70% of the vote.

Running a city is not easy. The job has all the difficulties of running a country, except that public attention cannot be diverted to foreign affairs, and the control of the economy lies elsewhere. Mayors often have little control even of their own city. In Mumbai, for instance, neither the mayor nor the municipal commissioner exercises real power, which in India often lies with the surrounding state. It is notable that Delhi, which as the capital has its own legislative authority, is the only big Indian city to produce a comprehensive urban plan—now, incidentally, arousing much controversy. The Nairobi mayor's office has been similarly neutered, lest it should become too powerful.

Having one government responsible for both the city and its surrounding state would, however, be the envy of many



The bureaucrats cleaned up Bangkok



► American officials. It would lead to better co-ordination of transport, education and other services, and a better chance of getting richer people in the suburbs to pay a share of the costs of the big city from which they usually benefit. But any kind of collaboration is complicated if, like Minneapolis, you have 344 local governments within your metropolitan area.

This fragmentation of government is less common in the South of the United States: Virginia's Fairfax county contains no municipalities, whereas Allegheny county in Pennsylvania, with a similar population, has 130. But for the northerners consolidation is difficult. Only a few American cities, such as Louisville and Jacksonville, have managed to rationalise a multiplicity of competing jurisdictions.

France has done better, as has South Africa, which has reduced the number of local authorities from 1,100 in 1994 to 283 today. However, it has yet to enable poor and black communities to be joined administratively to rich and white ones, as geographical logic would often suggest. Brazil has created special urban zones with comprehensive planning for health, job-training, microcredit, you name it. By contrast, Mexico City, with 79 executive bodies, 63 legislative zones and three levels of government, has yet to succeed in its efforts to co-ordinate its many urban plans.

Not all cities need to be planned, in the way that 16th-century Rome was laid out by Pope Sixtus V, with his obelisks and connecting streets, and Paris was designed by Baron Haussmann, with his boulevards and *grands travaux*. And some planning has been a disappointment, if not an out-

right failure. It took almost 200 years—and the Kennedy Centre, and the invention of air-conditioning—to make Washington, DC, for example, a civilised city. Canberra has yet to rid itself of its deadening political monoculture. Brasilia has grown tatty, attracting slums, as has Abuja, yet another planned capital. But planning is needed if infrastructure is to work, the local economy is to fit in with the regional and national economies and if health, education and other social policies are to be suitable for the people they must serve.

Plan of inaction

The failure to plan can be seen most obviously in inadequate physical infrastructure. Bengaluru's streets are choked because no public transport system has been built to carry the traffic that economic success has created. Mumbai's airport, crucial for the city that has long been the gateway to India, is already handling many more passengers than it was designed for. The only solution is to build a new airport across the harbour, with a rail link to the city across a bridge.

But then almost every aspect of Mumbai's infrastructure is inadequate. Power shortages mean daily blackouts for many areas, which in turn lead to train delays and cuts in water supplies. An eight-lane bridge, with two lanes set aside for buses, is being built over the sea along the west of the peninsula, with the aim of relieving congestion ashore. Other bridges are planned to carry traffic across the bay on the east side, where a huge new city, Navi Mumbai, is to be built round a special economic zone, one of 72 approved for the

state of Maharashtra. And a metro, 80% paid for by private investors, will eventually carry commuters to and from their place of work on the peninsula.

A collection of officials, industrialists, professionals and NGO workers known as the Citizens Action Group gather regularly under the chairmanship of the state's chief minister to help push all these projects along. It is supported by Bombay First, the businessmen's organisation, and other interested parties. But the task that confronts them is simply huge, ranging from improving the city's schools and hospitals to persuading the national Ministry of Shipping, which owns the port, to release some of its 800 hectares of land for municipal use.

With 300-400 families moving into Mumbai every day and the city needing at least 1.1m houses for poorer Mumbaikars (according to McKinsey in 2003), the necessary sense of urgency will be hard to achieve. Mumbai really needs a completely different form of government, one that would ideally be led by a mayor who could give his authority to all the endeavours that the city requires and be held responsible for both their successes and any shortcomings. Of that there is no sign.

It is a paradox, common even in the democracies of the developing world, that voting and city government appear disconnected. The explanation is that most voters in cities are poor. The slums alone account for nearly 1 billion people, one in three of the world's city-dwellers. Yet they are not organised and, lacking money, also lack political power. Until that changes, many cities may be destined to fester in corruption and misgovernment. ■

In place of God

Culture replaces religion

FROM the earliest times, a central role of any big town was sacred or religious. Until the 16th century, the status of a city was in England granted only to towns that had a diocesan cathedral, and to this day the title "metropolitan" is in some churches given to senior clerics. Cities still tend to have bigger and more splendid churches, mosques and temples than do mere towns and villages. But in the rich world the religious role of the metropolis has diminished, often to vanishing point. The ensuing vacuum has generally been

filled by a secular alternative.

In some places it is shopping, appropriately if you believe that consumerism is a new religion, and remember that the shrines of old often had a market close by. In others the shrine-substitute is a cultural or sporting attraction. This has the merit of feeding the soul while at the same time providing employment, producing profits and helping to fill the coffers of the city government.

Some cities created their special non-religious attractions without realising that

they would draw tourists. Long before Florence, Venice and other European towns became must-see sights of the 18th-century Grand Tour, Rome had built its Coliseum, Babylon its hanging gardens and Alexandria its lighthouse. Nowadays visitors flock to Berlin, London or Paris to see an exhibition or collection, watch a play or opera, or listen to a concert. And it is not just tourists who are drawn. When wooing investors or companies ready to move their headquarters, rival cities will now flaunt their galleries, theatres and or-



Calatrava cheers up Milwaukee

► chestras as much as their airline connections, modern hospitals and fibre-optic networks. That was partly how Chicago in 2000 stole Boeing's headquarters from under the noses of Dallas and Denver.

No city can overnight create a great orchestra, a gallery filled with rare masterpieces or a theatre district to rival Broadway. But it took no time for Sydney, then a faltering but by no means moribund city, to become visually synonymous with its unconventional opera house, finished in 1973. By contrast, Bilbao was a run-down industrial town in a run-down part of Spain, but when it opened its Guggenheim museum in 1997, it inspired imitators all over the world.

Bilbao's coup was to get a first-class American architect, Frank Gehry, to design a futuristic building which has served to transform the image of the city (if not the reality) into that of an ultra-modern, arty, fun-filled metropolis. Milwaukee, another depressed city, has likewise cheered itself up with a showy art gallery, this one designed by a Spanish architect, Santiago Calatrava. Seattle commissioned Rem Koolhaas, a Dutch architect, to design an eye-catching library, and Fort Worth secured a prize-winning Japanese, Tadao Ando, for its new museum.

One museum does not make a culture complex, however, and the more skilful exponents of the art of dazzle-and-regenerate go for a succession of buildings. Abu Dhabi is to open branches of both the Louvre and the Guggenheim. Chicago has

created a Millennium Park, with sculptures, an auditorium and an extraordinary fountain, though the humdrum amusements of its Navy Pier seem to pull in more people. And Valencia has recently added an opera house, designed by its own Mr Calatrava, to the new museums, aquarium and sculpture garden that make up its City of Arts and Sciences.

Other cities—Kuala Lumpur, Taipei, Shanghai, soon perhaps St Petersburg and Paris—go for tall buildings, believing, as did the burghers of medieval San Gimignano, that height means importance. And others lure expositions, jamborees or sporting events. Few have done this as skilfully as Barcelona, which used the 1992 Olympic games to renew its transport system, put up new buildings, revamp its airport and rebuild most of its infrastructure.

Beyond the fringe

An alternative is to hold an annual fair or festival, which almost every city in the world now seems to be doing in some form. Edinburgh, however, may have milked the cultural variety as successfully as any city. Founded in 1947, the main festival has spawned sub-festivals for books, films and television, not to mention a host of fringe events. It is widely imitated.

Yet neither buildings nor events are guaranteed to pay off, either financially or in terms of pleasing the citizenry. The series of Maggie's centres being built for cancer patients near hospitals in British cities shows that small functional buildings can

be well designed and aesthetically satisfying (all are the work of well-known architects). But many people value the character of old neighbourhoods, whether architecturally notable or not.

Modern cities tend to look alike. Cheap housing seems to mean identical blocks built of concrete. And even more expensive buildings tend to be constructed to run-of-the-mill designs. No wonder that swathes of Seoul look like swathes of São Paulo and swathes of Shanghai. Even the most ambitious buildings, many designed by trophy architects who flit from one country to the next, often seem alien to their context. Dubai's Burj Al Arab hotel, which is meant to resemble a giant dhow, may have visual echoes of local history. But the City of London's gigantic Gherkin is as in or out of place there as it would be anywhere else. The same could be said of the Roppongi Hills centre in Tokyo, François Mitterrand's national library in Paris or countless buildings elsewhere.

Most cities in rich countries, with honourable exceptions, have been wanton in tearing down buildings, domestic, commercial and public, that were built to a human scale and reflected local history. Tokyo has been vandalised. More damage was visited on Britain's cities by architects and planners in the 1950s and 1960s than by all the German bombing in the second world war. Unfortunately, similar mistakes are being repeated in the fast-growing cities of Africa and Asia, where the stock of old buildings is often smaller.

Shanghai has allowed block upon block of distinctive red-brick tenements to be demolished, just as Beijing has let developers destroy the courtyard houses of its *hutong* neighbourhoods. Mumbai has been exemplary in listing for preservation most of its notable old buildings—it has some of the best Victorian architecture in the world—but is still destroying chawls, the single-room tenement buildings that give the city so much of its proletarian character. Even Mecca is tearing down its heritage, including the house in which the Prophet Muhammad was born, to make way for nondescript developments.

People want all sorts of things from their neighbourhood. As the urban iconoclast Jane Jacobs said, they want the untidiness that comes with having houses close to workplaces, shops next to flats, and rich next to poor. They also want a balance between privacy and the opportunity of chance, or planned, encounter. But none of that need mean ugliness. Cities, after all, still have spiritual needs to satisfy. ■



The reinvention test

A successful city must expect to go through several rebirths over time

CITIES are durable. Most last longer than the countries that surround them, or indeed any other human institutions. But some thrive, whereas others merely mark time (Cleveland, Minsk, Pyongyang), go into apparently long-term decline (Detroit, New Orleans, Venice) or disappear (Tenochtitlán, Tikal, Troy). What are the characteristics of a successful city?

The short answer is good government and a flourishing economy. But such attributes may come and go in the life of a metropolis. In order to be continuously successful, a city has to be able to reinvent itself, perhaps several times. Harvard's Edward Glaeser describes how Boston has done this three times—"in the early 19th century as the provider of seafaring human capital for a far-flung maritime trading and fishing empire, in the late 19th century as a factory town built on immigrant labour and Brahmin capital, and finally in the 20th century as a centre of the information economy." On each occasion, human capital provided the secret to Boston's rebirth. A strong base of skilled workers, writes Mr Glaeser, has been a source of long-run urban health.

Education was important from the first in Boston. But Mr Glaeser draws attention to other characteristics of the city that were present even in colonial times. It had a strong set of community organisations, because of its church structure, and something like the rule of law. It also had a tradition of "democratic egalitarianism".

Law has been essential for urban life since Babylonian times, both because cities have usually been centres of commerce, and trade needs regulation, and because cities tend to draw different kinds of people, whose success in living together depends on common rules of behaviour. Democracy, too, has served cities well, providing a shock-absorber for changing economic times and a mechanism whereby immigrants can join the mainstream.

Immigration, or at least an ethnic and religious mix, has also been closely associated with urban success. As Joel Kotkin points out in "The City", Chinese towns at the end of the first millennium AD showed the same cosmopolitan mixture as did Alexandria, Cairo, Antioch and Venice.

Pre-1492 Seville, 16th-century London and 19th-century Bombay (now Mumbai) all contained a variety of different peoples, whether Muslims, Jews, Parsis or others.

Throughout history, cities open to the world have benefited both from an exchange of goods and from a trade in ideas from abroad. Japan, by closing its doors to foreigners, condemned its cities to slow marination in their own culture until the country's opening up after 1853. Today the burgeoning cities with the best chance of overcoming their difficulties are those in Asia and Latin America that can gain from globalisation. Africa's cities, largely excluded from this phenomenon, are winning relatively little investment, trade or entrepreneurial fizz from foreigners.

Some cities in the rich world, too, have been much more successful than others at exploiting globalisation. The ones that have done best are those that have plugged into global industries and been able to capture the headquarters or lesser corporate centres of globalised companies, especially banks and other financial firms, argues Saskia Sassen, of the University of Chicago. London, New York and Tokyo are pre-eminent in this, but some other cities—Paris, Frankfurt, Zurich, Amsterdam, Chicago, Los Angeles, Sydney, Hong Kong, São Paulo, Mexico City—are not far behind.

Not every city can "go global" or will even want to. There are other types of *raison d'être*. One is simply to be a pleasant place to live and work, pleasant meaning different things to different people, of course. In the developing world most people would be delighted to live in a city that was prosperous and well governed, if that meant jobs were available, officials were honest, the streets were safe, housing was affordable and transport, sanitation and basic utilities operated to minimum standards. Even in rich countries not all these things can be taken for granted.

Mercer, a consulting firm, publishes a ranking of big cities each year based on an assessment of about 40 factors falling into ten categories (political, economic, cultural, medical, educational, public-service, recreational, consumer-goods, housing and environmental). Last year the top ten cities were Zurich, Geneva, Vancouver, Vi-

No points for thrills

Global livability rankings, 2005

City	Ranking	City	Ranking
Vancouver	1	Dusseldorf	26
Melbourne	2	Amsterdam	26
Vienna	2	Reykjavik	26
Geneva	2	Munich	26
Perth	5	Luxembourg	26
Adelaide	5	Cleveland	26
Sydney	5	Pittsburgh	26
Zurich	5	Honolulu	33
Toronto	5	Boston	33
Calgary	5	Lyon	33
Brisbane	11	Chicago	33
Copenhagen	11	Miami	33
Helsinki	11	Seattle	33
Stockholm	11	Madrid	33
Frankfurt	11	Barcelona	33
Montreal	16	Atlanta	41
Tokyo	16	Hong Kong	41
Hamburg	16	Minneapolis	41
Paris	16	Manchester	41
Oslo	20	Washington, DC	41
Auckland	20	Detroit	41
Berlin	20	Houston	47
Brussels	20	London	47
Osaka Kobe	20	Los Angeles	47
Wellington	20	Dublin	47

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit

enna, Auckland, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Munich, Bern and Sydney.

The Economist Intelligence Unit, a sister organisation to *The Economist*, carries out a similar exercise (see table). Five of its top ten cities for 2005 were also in Mercer's top ten. All ten in each list, with the exception of Sydney and Calgary, might be considered rather homely, even dull. The cities that have done most to excite attention the world over—New York, Chicago and Los Angeles—are also rans. Smallish countries mostly do well, and Australia, the most urbanised country of all, ranks notably highly, at least in the EIU list.

No list includes the ability to reinvent itself among the desirable qualities of a city. That may, however, be increasingly put to the test, for some people believe that cities have had their day. ■



Et in suburbia ego?

With age, cities go centrifugal—but maybe not for ever

WITH people heading for cities as never before, it may seem an odd moment to be announcing their impending demise. In fact, it is an old cry: as long ago as 1967 Marshall McLuhan declared, “The city no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost for tourists.” Some of today’s urban critics, such as James Heartfield, take much the same view. Many of the cities that have been around longest are in economic decline, such critics point out, and in some places more people are leaving them than joining them. When the newly popular cities of the developing world are a bit older, will they be considered just as undesirable places to live in as central Buffalo or central Bradford?

In America you certainly have to be an optimist to believe that the old rustbelt cities will soon regain population or economic vitality. The surroundings of Detroit may be pleasant and prosperous enough, and may stay that way, but the centre is dying. Cities of this kind are like hummocks of spinifex, or porcupine grass, whose centre eventually collapses, leaving live rings surrounding a dead middle.

City centres might actually look much deader than they already do but for one curious change. In parts of America at least, such as Detroit and Philadelphia, many houses have become less expensive to buy than they were to build. Poor Americans live in cities largely because of access to public transport and services provided by benign municipal governments, argues Harvard’s Mr Glaeser. But in blighted cities, he says, they have an extra reason to stay: if they move out, they will not be able to afford a house elsewhere.

Plenty of cities are not dying, of course, even in the United States, where people have been flocking to the metropolises of the South and West for decades. But—Mr Glaeser again—the dominant form of city living in America, whether in the rustbelt or the sunbelt, is sprawl, a natural consequence of lots of land and a car-based culture. As a result, the typical, densely packed metropolis of 1900 has become a diffuse agglomeration of old city centre, rich suburbs and then even-lower-density, semi-urban exurbs, where every house sits on its own little prairie. So while central At-

lanta grew by 6% in the 1990s, its overall metropolitan area expanded by 39%, with the biggest expansion farthest from the middle. A similar pattern of flourishing fringes can be seen all over the country—sunbelt, rustbelt or snowbelt.

The centre may be a place to visit for work or entertainment rather than to live in. That is true, for instance, of Los Angeles, despite its efforts to give itself a beating, lovable heart. But then the suburbs, especially if they are fairly old, may have acquired all the characteristics of cities: a “downtown”, swanky shops, the headquarters of a *Fortune* 500 company, maybe a mega-church, a theatre, a symphony orchestra and often an army of Latino migrants who have never been near a traditional ghetto in the city centre. The exurbs are more formless.

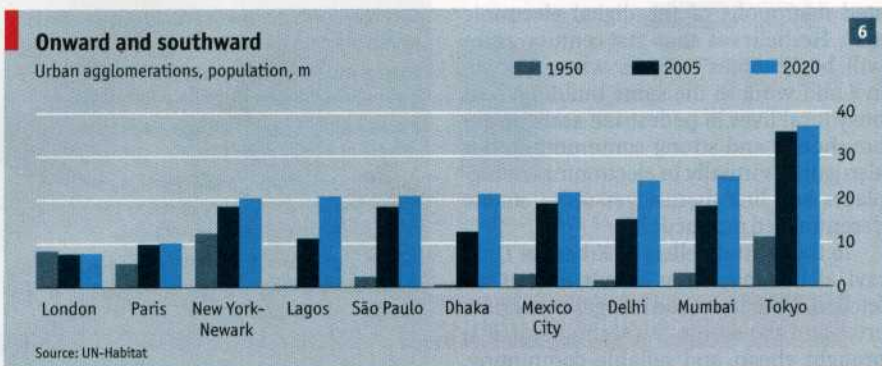
Much of this is uniquely American, but suburban living is not. In his book “Sprawl”, Robert Bruegmann quotes Daniel Defoe’s comments 300 years ago on the number of houses of “gentlemen of quality” springing up in Surrey villages outside London. Nowadays, says Mr Heartfield, the city critic, only 9% of Britons live in an urban core, whereas 43% prefer the suburbs; barely 5% live in true country. Even France, a late urbaniser, is becoming suburban. Its *banlieues* are usually associated with immigrants, poverty and unrest. But those are typical only of some inner suburbs. The outer ones are much like America’s: white, prosperous and gaining inhabitants, just as French city centres are losing them.

Some of those who say the city has had

its day also point to economic and technical changes that seem to remove one of the most basic reasons for getting together in an urban huddle. No longer do people have to gather round the *agora* to do their business. Information technology allows them to work wherever they want. Given that they can also get a religious, sporting or cultural fix by turning on the television, and do their shopping as well as their work on the internet, why live in a city? As Jefferson said, cities are “pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man.” They are the sort of places where you get mugged.

Not so fast. Other changes suggest that it may be sprawl, not the city, that is doomed. Land is finite, population is still expanding and the motor car’s dominance may not last much longer. With global warming and no economic alternative to scarce petrol, it may not be feasible to go on living 20km away from everything—school, work, babysitter, Starbucks.

In any event, other trends suggest that for every Timmy Willie, there is a Johnny Town-Mouse: many people like urban life and want to go on living in a city, particularly the centre. Among them are the elderly, a growing share of the population, who want easy access to transport, doctors, hospitals, cinemas and above all family and friends. And the young are urban creatures, too. They like the buzz of a city, the concentration of restaurants, clubs and other forms of entertainment. And the better educated (and so the richer) are likely to find work in the universities, hospitals and research centres that tend to cluster in cit- ▶▶





ies. The suburbs may be pleasant enough when parents are absorbed with work and children, but for the childless and the empty-nesters the city has many merits.

Several academics take this view. Some, such as Richard Florida, of George Mason University, see cities as natural homes for the "creative class", whose members are artists, designers, academics and so on. Others, such as Terry Nichols Clark, of the University of Chicago, stress the pleasures of the city as a reason to live there: entertainment, they say, can replace manufacturing in the post-industrial city, providing both jobs and fun.

Others find further reasons for optimism. Bruce Katz, of the Brookings Institution in Washington, argues that there is much more inventiveness at municipal and state level in America than at federal level. A city like Denver is exploiting its power to tax to introduce a light-rail system. Private-sector investment is being combined with government money for urban purposes much more widely and effectively. Cities such as Chicago are now seen as central to environmental improvements. All this means that public policy is becoming more city-centred.

At the same time cities are becoming sexier in the popular imagination—literally, in the case of "Sex and the City", but more metaphorically through other television shows like "Seinfeld" and "Friends". The trendiness is not confined to New York. For anyone on the way up, the city is the place to be. Some 60% of the jobs in American cities fall into the "new economy" category, compared with about 40% in the Sprawl-Mart suburbs. And once they have got to the top, the successful do not always opt for wide-open spaces: the most densely populated borough in Britain is London's smart Kensington & Chelsea.

Looking to the future, William Mitchell, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argues that the next urban age will be characterised by "the new, network-mediated metropolis of the digital electronic era". He believes that 21st-century cities will be "e-topias"—places where people live and work in the same building, lead busy local lives in pedestrian-scale neighbourhoods and strong communities, but also gather virtually in electronic meeting-places and link themselves up to enable decentralised production.

To the slum-dwellers of Kibera or Dhavari, all this may seem distant, indeed far-fetched. Their first need is to get out of poverty—and the slums. Yet technology, if it brought cheap and reliable commuting,



Centripetal heads, centrifugal hearts

might help: they could then afford to live on less expensive land in the suburbs.

In that event, rich and poor cities might start to look more similar and, for some, more attractive. For it is tempting to see in the popularity of the suburbs an attempt to marry the convenience of urban life with the traditional charms of the country. Human beings are adaptive. Many have for centuries relished city life. Like the robins and great tits that adjust their songs to city noises, they are urban survivors.

But talk to many an inhabitant of today's big cities and you soon detect a rural background, and often a slight wistfulness with it. Where do Chinese city-dwellers go for their holidays? Back to where they, or

their family, once came from. Where do urban Africans get buried? In their villages. Even in highly urbanised Japan the farmer and his rice field maintain a special place in the mind of the Tokyo *sarariman*.

When the current rush to the cities ends and this great episode in the history of urbanisation is over, which will probably be when 80% of the world's population live in cities, the true effects of urban life may be clearer. In their book "Mismatch: Why Our World No Longer Fits Our Bodies", Peter Gluckman and Mark Hanson argue that the big changes in human history, most of which have happened rather recently in humans' evolutionary history, have not been matched by changes in human biology. Cities may be the epitome of modernity, but they are inhabited by a creature designed for a pre-agricultural existence. The supermarket is no substitute for the steppes, plains and savannahs of the hunter-gatherer. The office chair is no place for the descendants of *Homo erectus*. No wonder there is a tension between habitat and inhabitant.

Perhaps that tension will lead to some terrible rupture in the megacities now taking shape. It is not hard to see that political changes—perhaps new city-states, perhaps new forms of city-cum-regional government—may ensue. With luck, though, the tension can instead be put to work, reinventively, to create better cities. Dachas and weekend cottages will be popular. The suburbs will keep some adherents; if a cheap and non-polluting substitute for petrol can be found, they may even represent the compromise of choice for discommodated 21st-century man. But there is no going back to the countryside now. ■

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