

**Commission of Urban Geography**  
***Urban Challenges in a Global World***  
**2016-2020**

***Mission***

The Urban Commission is designed to encourage geographical research on the new *Urban Challenges* emerging in an increasingly *Complex World*, and to further the exchange of findings among urban geographers from many countries. Cities, with their distinctive processes and problems, are major features of the modern world.

Hence the commission will use a comparative global context to focus on their properties, the social, economic and environmental issues they pose, and to evaluate the utility of political and societal solutions to their problems. Comparisons themselves will continue to be debated following the current debates developed nowadays in the highest ranked journals of urban geography.

Multidisciplinary approaches are increasing in urban studies, and the commission will promote the specific contribution of the geographical methods and concepts. Geographic urban issues focus on how such features as differential spatial proximity, segregation, cohesion, environmental and governance factors are transforming the character and vitality of urban places and are creating new challenges that need to be overcome. Particular attention is paid to the use of multi-scale approaches in analysing changes and to such features as: the differential diffusion of innovations, hierarchies, networks, concentrations, segregations, and renovations, etc. in altering both urban systems and the internal structures of cities. We will especially encourage the development of new concepts and the involvement of geographers in new digital methods using Big Data to improve knowledge and comprehension on cities.

Given this perspective, the current proposal is built upon the work of the 2012-2016 Urban Commission. It will continue the efforts to improve democratic and participatory practices inside the commission, which has been supported by a dynamic and interactive website, allowing for more bottom-up initiatives, and encouraging younger scholars to attend meetings.

The commission 2016-2020 aims at developing further collaborations inside the IGU and different activities, publications and meetings with continental and international associations dealing with urban issues. It will promote geography and urban geographers in different spheres of education, research and policies.

## Three issues for Urban Geography

In order to focus debates, the commission proposes a starting point of a rational based on three main conceptions of urban evolution:

### **I- Inter-dependent urban systems**

### **II- Diversity between and within cities**

### **III- Sustainability and Equity**

These 3 main domains lead to a proposal for 11 critical issues that will frame researchers' contributions and encourage debate. The critical issues will evolve year after year leading to a more complete renewal in 4 years.

**I- Inter-dependent Urban Systems.** Increasingly, a few hundred city regions account for much of the world's consumption and production, just as a few hundred large corporations now dominate most of the world's trade, and sites of production. More and more people live within huge agglomerations. One result is that these core cities (the 'World Cities') are increasingly connected in many ways: by more rapid, more intense, and spatially extensive linkages of information, goods and money, as well as migration and tourism. Large corporations link distant cities into the same global strategies, and international agencies encourage states to co-operate in international governance. At the same time the intense interaction supports greater variation in economic and political roles among cities. Small and medium cities are sometimes "shrinking" but are always more dependent on the central large metropolises in order to connect with the rest of the world. These urban concentrations pose some key questions that are intrinsically urban and geographical: What are the nodes, structures and functions of these emerging urban networks? How can we locate each city within this multinational allocation of economic activity and control? These issues are especially relevant to problems of economic competition, development, and innovation since the networks transmit ideas, and the cities foster the innovations. This is not only a global issue, because each continent and each country contains similar networks. Clearly, we need to investigate whether these new networks are shaped by deep-seated structural processes, such as the market or individual choice, or through deliberate national and regional policies in the diverse regions of the world.

**II- Diversity between and within Cities.** The most striking feature of urban life is the compartmentalization of jobs, of social groups, and of land use, including workplaces and homes. Inevitably, these specialized activities are separated spatially both, among cities in a world division of labour, and inside urban areas by cluster formation and the increasing segregation and specialization of places. The new complexity of multi-scale interactions implies a world in which more and more of the population is exposed to this type of specialization and spatial structure that shapes urban behaviour and lifestyles. Many cities are becoming more unequal and more specialized, as well as multi-layered, in terms of social class and ethnicity. As a result cities differ in employment opportunities and exhibit distinctive forms of poverty, as well as providing opportunities that attract migrants from rural areas and other cities, while they also vary in their ability to preserve the heritage of their historic past. Rapid urban growth often creates an imbalance between the population and the city's resources of housing and

infrastructure and reduces the quality of life of its citizens. Economic integration and new immigration can bring insecurity, or accelerate spatial change and conflict within the city. In many cities crime, disease, and environmental degradation overwhelm the public sector. The study of the regularities in these processes has become a staple of urban geographic research over the years. It has led the proposed urban commission to reposition spatial diversity within multi-scale, multi-level and multi-dimensional urban processes.

**III- Sustainability and Equity.** Sustainability and equity are crucial to allow harmonized urban developments in the future. Geographers have always been leaders in the study of urban sprawl and the associated pollution, transportation, and infrastructure difficulties that result as well as the problems produced by environmental disasters. But the new concept of sustainability, which has emerged as one of the key societal concerns of the last decade, has provided important new perspectives, through attempts to diminish the consumption of non-renewable resources, and reduce pollution and sprawl, whilst meeting the basic needs and aspirations of present and future generations. However, the processes of new urban concentrations, new compact forms and the renewal of cities, often create less equity, resulting in more social injustice and less security. Urban geographers in the new commission can help in our understanding of these problems by monitoring the increasingly influential efforts by individual cities around the world to build more environmentally *and* socially sustainable urban environments in the search for more just cities.

### **Eleven specific Urban Challenges**

Within these broad themes, eleven research critical issues and areas have been identified, in order to more closely focus the work of the proposed commission. These questions include both theoretical and applied issues derived from the general title of '*Urban Challenges in a Complex World*'. Each meeting will focus on one or two of these topics, although not exclusively, to ensure that emerging new ideas from specific members can also be dealt with. Debates and collective publications will be encouraged on these specific topics in order to elaborate the issues.

#### **1- Complex Urban Systems and processes of cities' transformation**

Urban systems have seen radical changes in recent decades and will continue to do so. How are various national, continental and global urban systems changing - particularly in relation to such features as city size, economy, migration, interaction, linkage, communication, transport and control functions? What processes and differential development paths are involved and how have different government policies affected these changes? Previous Urban Commissions have produced a large body of work on the urban systems of individual countries. This work will be extended to incorporate updated national and international comparisons and recognise the accelerated growth of a limited number of global command centres in the highly connected world of electronic communications, finance, trade, and rapid travel. In addition, we must seek solutions for those cities that are left behind by these changes.

#### **2- Technological innovations, creative activities in cities**

Urban economies are evolving quickly, with the growth of the “service” sectors and new activities in science, technology, commerce, communication, media, art and design. Why do these activities concentrate in some cities and how do these new “clusters” integrate within existing economic, social and environmental contexts? Can one identify cycles in these economic trends?

### **3- Innovative, smart building and transportation in cities**

Can we identify “smart cities”? What criteria in terms of governance, planning, economy are needed to qualify smart cities? As a result of new technologies are all cities become “smart”? Does this “smart” growth benefit the entire city or does it increase polarisation and fragmentation? Does it alter the morphology and structure of urban areas and can it lead to new forms of urban society?

### **4- Polycentrism, small and medium size cities**

At national or regional scales, small and medium size cities have very different issues depending on their proximity to large cities. In remote areas, small and medium size cities often lack higher education, and advanced services, that lead many young people to leave never to return. These places find it difficult to attract investment and are often by-passed in favour of larger more accessible locations. How can these places find new dynamism? Can they counter increasing concentration in metropolises? Can they provide an alternative approach or insight for sustainable urban systems? On the other hand if one focuses on a more city-region scale, small and medium size cities around the metropolises constitute new urban spaces such as “edge” or “edgeless cities” that remain under the influence of the central metropolis. What is the future of such places? To what extent are new polycentric patterns emerging and what is the likely impact on sustainability and spatial equity?

### **5- Sustainable to resilient cities**

Can sustainability be tackled at the urban scale? To what extent should the concept of “resilience” be considered in association with “sustainability” in order to orient urban policies? What progress is being made by *cities* around the world in the development of new programmes and policies to create more resilience? How can these solutions be evaluated at various spatial scales? What are the emerging best practices for cities, from smart growth to green solutions etc., at national or regional scales and what are the problems that restrict progress in implementing more these effective policies?

### **6- Shrinking and aging Cities**

A serious new problem has emerged in some cities of the developed world. The declining birth rate of industrialized countries is creating many settlements with increasingly aging and declining populations. What are the effects of this trend upon the functions and character of these cities, especially their infrastructures and levels of social provision? What policies are emerging in cities around the world affected by this problem to cope with these changes? How can so-called “shrinking cities” manage their future?

### **7- Urban Governance, planning and participative democracy**

It is an unfortunate, but undeniable, fact that most large urban agglomerations are not permitted to be governed by their citizens. Control over revenues and investments is shared with other levels of government and/or fragmented among dozens of small municipal units within the metropolitan area. Inevitably these political arrangements affect the spatial structure of infrastructure and public services, including planning. We must explore the spatial issues that detract from good urban governance, and investigate the utility of emerging administrative solutions seen in many countries, such as the ‘new regionalism’ that seeks to provide a new spatial solution to the provision of services. In parallel, citizens are becoming more organized and becoming more active and involved in

decision making at the neighbourhood level. This activism affects the way urban planning functions and is bound to have impacts on cities' future. This will also affect urban areas beyond the limits of the traditional city.

### **8- Contested Social Spaces**

The increasingly multi-layered social and ethnic character of cities has led to more intricate life spaces within cities, and increased the potential for conflicts among various groups. Since many communities, made up of either diasporas or cosmopolitans, exhibit strong intra-community cohesion, this may threaten other communities. How can we measure these new patterns and changes and make effective international comparisons? Where and when do conflicts emerge? How can differences between the various actors in these spaces be reconciled, ensuring that local communities are themselves empowered, rather than simply passive recipients of change from forces beyond their control? Is it possible for all groups to live in tolerance with one another?

### **9- Subjective/Objective well-being in cities**

In the past, cities survived because of their ability to create secure environments, community cohesion and they permitted individual self-development for their citizens. In many contemporary cities, social fragmentation, crime rates, anti-social behaviour, ethnic conflict, huge distance to work, and environmental issues, threaten to make them less liveable. Apparent solutions such as gated communities or higher levels of surveillance, which create more private spaces and segregation may work for some but what of about well-being for all citizens of the city?. How can we best conceptualize and measure subjective and objective well-being in cities? How do we make international and national comparisons of cities' well-being? Can we apply best practice from cities that have successfully overcome these problems to other cities and societies, as well as linking these problems to our understanding of the new forms of urban social space?

### **10- Urban Heritage and Conservation**

The distinctive identity of many cities and societies depends upon their historical heritage, as expressed in their built fabric. How can these identities be understood and interpreted? What are the policies that support the preservation of these heritages, yet still provide liveable and affordable spaces in these areas, rather than allowing historic areas and city centres to be overwhelmed by homogenised tourism? How can heritage and identity be harnessed for the social, economic and environmental renewal of cities?

### **11- New concepts and methods in urban studies**

As the world changes there seems to be more and more data and more and more things to measure. There are new forms of economic activity, increasing levels of personal and corporate communication, increasing mobility of capital and people, increasing levels of internet usage, increasing levels of e-commerce, and increasing levels of electronic participation in democracy. All of these have the potential to transform the interurban and intra-urban realms in which we live. Big data may help our understanding of many urban problems, but there is also a need for increasing conceptual and methodological sophistication to deal with these changes. New theories, approaches, methods and techniques are needed if we are to fully understand the urban world of the twenty-first century.