

Presentation

Objectives

The Urban Commission is designed to encourage geographical research on new urban problems, and to further the exchange of findings among urban geographers from many countries. Since cities, with their distinctive processes and problems, are major features of the modern world, it is vital to have a commission that focuses on their characteristics, problems and solutions in a comparative global context. A key aspect of the commission will be the encouragement of younger scholars to participate in our meetings.

The History of Urban Commissions

There has been a long tradition of productive urban commissions within the IGU. The current sequence dates back to the Moscow meetings of 1976, when Professor Kasimierz Dziewonski of Poland initiated a Commission on National Settlement Systems that emphasized comparisons between capitalist and socialist countries. Subsequent commissions have extended the urban interests to incorporate the variety of problems originating within cities, and have recruited commission members from countries throughout the world. They were chaired by Larry Bourne (Canada, 1984-1992) and Denise Pumain (France, 1992-2000). The current commission, led by Gerhard Braun (Germany), includes more than one hundred academics, representing more than thirty countries. The ten last meetings have been held in Asia (Nanjing, Seoul, Tokyo), Africa (Cape Town, Pretoria), and Latin America (Mexico City) as well as North America (Calgary) and Europe (Ljubljana, Glasgow, Santiago de Compostela). The current commission has already received invitations for future meetings from Hyderabad, Canterbury, and Tel Aviv. The main scholarly contributions of the various urban commissions have been presented in papers at the meetings, and are also available in a published volume of papers from each annual meeting; half a dozen of these volumes, each of several hundred pages, are still in print. The Commission also supports a website <http://www.cities-of-tomorrow.com/> to exchange information. An additionally important scholarly contribution of the Commission has been the opportunity to discuss ideas with colleagues representing markedly different urban environments, and to develop exchanges of faculty and graduate students.

Rationale for a new commission

The United Nations predicts that in 2007 the world will have more people living in urban settlements than in rural areas for the first time in human history. Although the transition from rural to urban lifestyles has already taken place in many countries, this urban change now affects the whole world, and is taking place at the same time as *major new transformations* in our existing human habitat. While the demographic explosion is a major cause of urban growth, we can also point to new communication and industrial technologies, the growth of service sectors, rapidly expanded spatial interaction and migrations, and the increasing speed and wider penetration of global capitalism by reduced trade barriers due to the reduction of trade restrictions and the spread of neo-liberal ideas.

As more of the world's population lives and works within an urban habitat, the intrinsic properties of urban systems and urban settlements have become the most important

determinants of human life. Within this newly urban world, the size and characteristics of the cities in which we live shape our life chances, our economic and social opportunities and our quality of life, especially within the huge metropolitan concentrations. But *a series of emerging trends are rapidly transforming the character of these cities and hinterlands* which influence so much of our day-to-day lives. These are seen in new combinations of urban land use mixes, varied degrees of concentration or de-concentration, changing spatial distributions of employment, income and ethnicity, a revived emphasis on civic culture and policies, increasing concern about the new hazards of the city life, in addition to an increasing recognition of the need to incorporate historical heritages and address the quality of life and amenities in cities. At the same time, these urban transformations have imposed even greater pressures upon the nearby countryside. A growing population consumes the resources from nearby communities and exports a variety of contaminants, creating an expanding 'footprint' of environmental impact, often with negative consequences for the quality of urban life. This has led to the increasing interest in the notions of 'sustainability', as well as the determinants of the 'quality of life', all of which support a variety of new and important research projects for urban geographers.

Although the various processes causing these urban transformations are common to many countries, the new changes in urban systems and the internal geography of cities, as well as concerns about sustainability, take different forms in different places. *The result is increasingly complex patterns of urban systems and urban structures. But the common forces at work in our increasingly interconnected world do not necessarily lead to homogenous results. The many transformations that are taking place are contingent upon local and regional circumstances, and the results are frequently indeterminate, often with varied and unanticipated consequences. Thus there is a pressing need to identify, monitor and explain these new and emerging patterns of differentiation in our urban world, through international co-operation - patterns that have been summarized in the proposed title of 'Emerging Urban Transformations'.* Ideally, each contribution from the commission members studying diverse cities, regions, and nations of the world will contribute to a common body of knowledge about the new trends in the evolution of urban systems, functions and forms, and the ways that they can be conceptualised and measured. Since urban geographers have long studied the many regularities and idiosyncrasies in urban life, it is appropriate that a global community of urban geographers, under the auspices of the IGU, should take stock of the ways in which the particular relationships among, and within, cities shape human life within the contemporary urban world. A new IGU Commission, with members from many countries, is ideally placed to make useful comparisons of the rapidly changing nature of urban phenomena among countries, and to identify and discuss the problems associated with them. These issues can be grouped into three major sub-themes that are current and visible manifestations of the new urban transformations, which in turn lead to seven specific problem areas that will focus the work on the proposed commission during its proposed eight year term:

i) Interdependent 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. 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 international 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.

ii) Change and Conflict within Cities. The most striking feature of urban life is the compartmentalization of jobs, of social groups, and of land use, including workplace and the home. Inevitably, these specialized activities are separated spatially, so that the study of the regularities in these patterns has become a staple of urban geographic research over the years. The new transformations imply 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. As well, many cities are becoming more unequal and more specialized, as well as multi-layered, both socially and ethnically. The result is that cities differ in employment opportunities, exhibit distinctive forms of poverty, as well as opportunities that attract migrants from rural areas and other cities, whilst cities 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. A variety of urban problems and solutions associated with these twenty first century changes await the proposed urban commission.

iii) Sustainability and Social Justice. Geographers have always been interested in problems of urban sprawl and the associated pollution, transportation, and infra-structure difficulties that result. But the new concepts of sustainability, which has emerged as one of the key societal concerns of the last decade, attempt 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, and increasing social justice and security. Urban geographers 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.

Specific Urban Problems

Within these broad themes a number of specific research problems and areas have been identified, in order to focus the work of the proposed commission. These problems include both theoretical and applied issues derived from the emerging urban transformations. Each meeting will focus on one or two of these topics, although not exclusively. The commission

members will be able to explore the global and regional nature of the urban transformations, to identify solutions to emerging problems, and to create new research networks among urban geographers in various countries and continents.

1) **More Complex Urban Systems.** There is little doubt that our urban systems have seen radical changes in the last decade and will continue to do so. How are the various national, continental and global urban systems changing - in such features as city size, economic specialization, migration, interaction 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 more rigorous national comparisons and the accelerated growth of a limited number of global command centres in the new, highly connected world of electronic communications and rapid travel. In addition, we must seek solutions for those cities that are left behind by these changes.

2) **Contested Social Spaces.** The increasingly multi-layered social and ethnic character of cities has led to more intricate life spaces within cities, and potential conflicts among the various groups. How can we measure these new patterns and changes and make effective international comparisons? Where do conflicts emerge? How can differences between the various actors in these spaces be reconciled, so that local communities are empowered, rather than being passive recipients of change from forces beyond their control?

3) **Creating Sustainability.** Can sustainability be tackled at the urban scale? What progress is being made by *cities* around the world in the development of new programmes and policies to create more environmentally and socially sustainable cities? How can these solutions be evaluated at various spatial scales? What are the emerging best practices in cities, from smart growth to green solutions etc, and what are the problems that restrict progress in implementing these more effective policies?

4) **Dilemmas of 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 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 with this problem to cope with these changes?

5) **Increasing Insecurity.** In the past, cities survived because of their ability to create secure environments for their citizens. In many contemporary cities crime rates, anti-social behaviour and ethnic conflict threaten to make them less liveable, despite higher levels of surveillance, and apparent solutions such as gated communities, which create more private

spaces and hence segregation. Part of the explanation for these trends may be unequal income distributions in which the lower income groups struggle to survive or maintain their position and the wealthy create exclusive areas. Several key problems emerge from these changes. How we can best conceptualize and measure these new forms of insecurity and more compartmentalised spaces? How do we make international and national comparisons of the increasing inequalities within cities and the levels of insecurities? Can we apply the best practices of cities that have successfully combated these problems to other cities and societies, as well as linking these problems to our understanding of the new forms of urban social spaces?

6) ***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 so many historic areas city centres to be disadvantaged by an homogenised tourism?

7) ***Urban Governance.*** It is an unfortunate, but undeniable, fact that most large cities are not permitted to govern themselves. Control over revenues and investments is shared with other levels of government and/or fragmented among dozens of small municipal units. Inevitably these political arrangements affect the spatial structure of infrastructure and public services, including planning. We must explore the spatial issues that affect urban governance, and investigate the utility of emerging administrative solutions seen in many countries, such as the 'new regionalism' that seeks to provide a solution to the provision of services.

Programme of work

Membership in the commission will be open to all qualified urban geographers. A new effort will be made to attract members from countries that do not currently participate in our work. The new commission should formalise procedures to identify voting members, such as one based on attending at least one or two meetings during the previous four years, in order to encourage more active participation in the commission. Every effort will be made each year to publish a book of research papers, or special editions of journals based on lectures presented at the annual meeting, in order to create a wider audience for the work of the commission. The commission will also develop a new website, listing current members and interests, the titles of papers, and how to access them, to help those unable to attend meetings.

During each yearly conference a formal, open business meeting, will be organized by the Executive and Steering Committee. This will include: an agenda and minutes available in advance of the meeting; votes on specific motions if necessary, as well as a section on 'Any Other Business' to allow members to raise issues of interest. Specific task forces, made up of separate and representative committees, may be constituted on a temporary basis to deal with major urban problems as they arise. The proposed commission will follow the successful pattern of previous urban commissions by organizing annual meetings in different cities, usually lasting for three or four days, followed by two days of scientific excursions. The organisation of the meeting will be the responsibility of the hosts and the executive and

steering committee. Usually one day of the meeting will be set aside for papers on one of the main problem areas to focus debate, and may include invited papers by experts and/or roundtables. Written proposals for hosting commissions will be required, along with presentations to the business meetings so members can provide advice on the plans of any host, and, if necessary, vote on competing proposals.

As of today the plans for commission venues are:

- 2009: Hyderabad, India
- 2010: Tel Aviv, august in connection with the IGU-regional conference.
- 2011: Open (IGU regional conference in Santiago).
- 2012: Cologne: 32. IGU Congress.
- 2013: IGU regional conference in Kyoto. To be discussed.
- 2014: IGU regional conference in Krakow. To be discussed.