

# FUTURES OF CITIES

*Maya van Leemput*

Picture a city. Start with spectacular towers of gleaming glass reaching high into the sky. Think of another city or the same one, with dwellings made of reeds, wood and plastics, along a stream filled with merchant boats. Walk with me through streets and alleys, tread on dust roads and mud. Listen to the hum of traffic on the ring road, the bleating radio from an open window, chattering girls on their way to school. Sirens, the bleeps and blips of locks and lifts. Notice the rabbits on the soft shoulder, the rat that shoots away on an empty pavement. Fend off monkeys. Smell the exhaust of long lines of cars in only a few dull colours (the seriousness of grey and silver, black and blue and white of course, especially vans). Look at dozens of vibrant trucks adorned with shiny little mirrors, detailed decorations and gods and aphorisms, all parked together not far from the train station. Think of a city with droves of people queuing for simple services or think of one where they wait in messy bunches to get on buses, buy mobile phone credit, send a parcel or collect stamps from public administrators. Weave your way with me from point A to B where bicycles rule the asphalt, the tidy roundabouts and stretches of old cobbles. Look at the human scramble for seats on trams, for Black Friday sales, celebrity concerts, a soccer match or a job for the day. Study underground transportation maps or use the spires of mosques and churches for orientation. Take me to the market, let's grab a bite to eat. Check out the multiplex cinemas or the makeshift film screenings elsewhere. Visit museums or galleries and if there are none, find the patios of arts centres where painters and photographers hang out with musicians and writers.

So many cities, so many distinctive sights and sounds. How can the characteristics by which we even recognise a city be pinned down? Cities are many things to many people. African cities are not like cities in Asia. European cities are unlike American cities. Newly erected cities are not the

same as those that have evolved gradually over centuries or millennia, growing outward from an old town centre. There are so many variations, that it seems parabolic to bundle them all together and pretend that we are talking about just one kind of environment for which we can study what futures may lie ahead.

To get over this hurdle, let's begin by looking back before looking forward, as is common practice in futures studies. Where did cities begin? Several of today's cities claim to be the first in history but there is no consensus on which one really deserves the title. A likely candidate is Aleppo, now for the most part bombarded to pieces in Syria's recent years of violence. I walked through the central neighbourhoods of this city in 2001. At the time it was the largest in the country. As I mourn Aleppo's beauty and the people who looked after me then, I recall the smell of its many bakeries and nargile parlours (shisha bars), the search for New Year's presents among the many wares sold in its pedestrian shopping street and the heat of the hammam beneath the walls of its ancient citadel. Rubble and dust remain. Reflecting on the futures of cities, this image of ruin persists.

Other places listed among the first where cities appeared are the Syrian capital Damascus, Kirkuk in Iraq and Sush in Iran. Jericho in the Palestinian Territories is considered one of the earliest proto-cities along with Çatalhöyük in Southern Anatolia. At the time of the last census (2007), Jericho counted less than 20,000 people. In its early days the current number of residents would have seemed massive. The planet at the time of the first settlements along the West Bank counted no more humans than the small region of Flanders today. Jericho didn't quite grow into a metropolis or even a city over its long course of history since 9000 BCE. It is just another tormented town today, all be it with the oldest city wall in the world. Demographics count. Our increasing global numbers determine the basic context for our cities' futures but by themselves they do not assure any particular city's continuous growth or prosperity.

'Two-thirds of world population will live in cities by 2050' titled the *Guardian* in May 2018. The headline is a rewording of the findings of the *2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects* by the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Their presentation of these statistics however, does not use the word 'city'. The UN news release refers instead to 'urban areas', where today already 54 per cent of the

world's population resides. To arrive at this figure the UN combined data from more than two hundred countries. The criteria for recognising an area as being 'urban' were specific to each country. There is no generally accepted definition for what is 'urban'. The objective criteria used for measurement are as varied as city environments themselves.

For example, Albania counted all towns and other industrial centres with 400 inhabitants or more. For Argentina residents had to number at least five times more to be included in the count. For Australia the statisticians looked for at least 1,000 inhabitants before 2001 and after that year for 10,000 or more. We're only at the letter A and all these cases rely on wildly dissimilar standards, even for a determination primarily based on the number of inhabitants. It seems unsuitable for these assorted counts to be added together under a single nomenclature, and yet they are.

Advancing insight plays a role in the divergence of statistic criteria. For China, which due to its size has a major impact on the count, the criteria changed significantly over time. Only since the year 2000 they include population density as a determining factor. Many other countries also include density as a criterion. This makes sense. My own intuitive understanding of the main characteristics of cities, which according to Manuel Castells is shared by many, begins with the idea that they are 'large and dense human settlements concentrated in a given space'. Urban geographers and sociologists like Castells point out that this however, is not enough to speak of a city. 'Our position actually follows the classical approach by Max Weber for whom the city is a specific spatial form of socio-political organisation.' The relevance of socio-political organisation is also reflected in the UN statistics. Columbia, Costa Rica and Croatia for instance, explicitly require administrative centres for any area to feature in the statistics. It is critical that boroughs, communes, municipalities, towns or cities all have their own local government, responsible for the territory in question. How and by whom cities are ruled, as well as the extent of their independence within larger territories, are heavily contested matters.

The main social criterion used for determining the urban nature of an area for the statistics relates to the types of employment that can be found there. While India expects 75% of the male working population in urban areas to be engaged in non-rural activities, Croatia expects 25% of the population to be employed in secondary or tertiary sectors and at least 50

per cent of the households to be non-agrarian. Japan is more demanding, here only *shi* are considered urban areas. 'Shi are municipalities with 50,000 inhabitants or more...where 60 per cent or more of the population are engaged in manufacturing, trade or other urban type of business'. The nature of economic activity is what counts here.

Finally, criteria concerning infrastructure are frequently used. Honduras lists: piped water service; communication by land (road or train) or regular air or maritime service; complete primary school; postal service or telegraph; and at least one of the following: electrical light, sewer system, or a health centre. This means that in Honduras there can be urban areas that have a school and a health centre but no electrical light or sewerage. I shudder when I imagine what such a health centre must be like. Taiwan requires of urban areas 'at least three of the following: the government seat, a police station or branch, a railway or bus station, a public primary, middle, or high school, a post office, a hospital or clinic, and a cinema.' By the same definition, the cross-roads settlements where my partner and I stopped overnight when cycling across the Sahel in 2001, would count as urban areas (they usually had some kind of police office, a bus station and a small clinic). But because Senegal itself only counts places with 10,000 inhabitants or more as urban, these places that would be considered urban in Taiwan, do not appear in the statistics. The designation 'urban area', it seems, is very much open to interpretation and the label 'city' reveals only some of its meaning with reference to the official statistics. We don't even know how to set standards for empirical observations about the percentage of urban dweller on earth. We need another way to think about city environments.

For lack of clear-cut objective criteria and unambiguous definitions, let's turn to lived experiences and how images of the futures of cities flow from them. I will start close to home, which for me is in one of the top ten most urbanised countries in the world. Almost all (98%) of Belgians reside in urban areas, whichever of the above mentioned criteria you care to apply. With 4062 inhabitants per square kilometre, the district in the South of Antwerp - the second largest city in the country - where I live, is twice as densely populated as Shanghai. I would never have guessed. At first sight the residential streets and social housing apartments, dispersed over the territory, do not seem a match for Shanghai's stereotypical high capacity skyline of tower blocks. The

district is called Hoboken and yes, it is where the first settlers of Hoboken, New Jersey - part of the New York Metropolitan area - came from. It does not by far, beat its New World mirror-self in population density like it does Shanghai. It feels more empty than full. The polling stations on election day in Hoboken-Antwerp, have queues, for sure, but they are not overflowing. Almost each of the many supermarket brands has a well-used branch in Hoboken. Some old *fritures* (chip shops) survive, a few pubs, a few tea houses. The old village main street, a centuries old connection path, harbours the last of the local merchants. The nearest cinema is in the centre of Antwerp proper but one of Hoboken's three small historical castles is home to a Youth and Cultural Centre.

During October 2017, local elections were held across Belgium. Everywhere you turned, the names of cities and towns stood centre stage in the political campaigns. Citizens were pushed to equate their identities with a whole array of characteristics 'typical' for the cities and towns where they happen to live. In Antwerp the Green party's slogan was 'Antwerp can do it'. It sounds like Obama and Nike slogans melded together when you translate it into English. In Dutch it works as an almost childish encouragement that points to the stereotypical Antwerp chauvinist streak (we can do it, we are good at getting things done, we are Antwerp). How this relates to environmental or 'green' issues, is a mystery. That it relates to city politics on the other hand is undeniable. Certainly, in the other big cities of Flanders similar efforts were made to engage voters on the basis of their local pride.

Cities provide identities but because identity is a mixed bag, the identities of their inhabitants are not all the same. Consequently, in our local elections diversity was a central theme. On the other side of the political spectrum to the Greens, the focus was on migration, one of the many factors contributing to diversity. To some, diversity is 'what makes a city', to others it is one of the main challenges, or even problems, that cities face.

How diversity can affect daily life in a city just recently became apparent in a rather mundane manner in the street where I live. Around the same time as the elections, the old toy and school wares store, just 100 metres from my house, had been refurbished to become 'the largest ethnic fresh market of Belgium' as the promotional material boasted. The opening weekend was a success, judging by the slow traffic jam passing my front

door. Inside the shop the lines for the cashier tills were good for a whole hour of waiting. The fruit-and-vegetables section was filled to the brim and constantly being refilled. The halal butcher, who might as well have been a Flemish hormone butcher for the quality of his meat, was doing amazing business. The shelves were stacked with honey comb, dried fruits and seeds. Other shelves had less wholesome offerings: sugary sweets in bright blue, purple and green, instant tea in similar hues, milk powders, tins of ravioli. All of the labels and price tags were in Turkish (weeks later now, they still are, despite a consumer law that says that all packaging and labels in Belgium should use at least one of the national languages and in particular the right one for the region where the items are sold). Moroccan, Eastern European and aboriginal Belgian shoppers still found their way to the items of interest to them during the hectic opening sales. Shopping carts were overflowing, some families had two or three by the time they left.

At the exit, candidates for a new political party were distributing flyers, their posters were cello-taped to the building's façade too. The party is called 'Democratisch Solidair Appel' and aims for the votes of Muslims in the political centre. The large majority of its candidates have a Muslim cultural background and in the previous legislature were members of the District Council for the Social Democrats or the Green party. They did not in the end get enough votes for a seat in Hoboken's council, but they did muster enough of their old voters to lose their former allies one seat, the difference between kicking the existing majority's out or not. A larger Flemish Nationalist representation and less diversity in the council is the result. Local politics are even more complicated than local shopping!

Diversity politics can only have a tangible impact on the futures of Antwerp as well as of any other city in the world. Cities have always attracted people from elsewhere, that is partly how they have come into being. The make-up of their population is not just determined by local factors but by economic, climate, political factors and conflicts in other places. At the same time, how cities handle diversity, how they avoid exclusion and how they give their residents the fullest opportunity to contribute to, and benefit from, the city environment is a question of local attitudes, sensitivities, insight and power. The elections results in the agglomeration of Antwerp, as well as the districts, had the Flemish nationalists who ruled for the last six years, stand their ground. Our right-

wing authoritarian mayor remains in place. The headscarf will remain prohibited attire for local civil servants for at least another six years. The counter example of another Antwerp district, Borgerhout, is hopeful. Here, a concerted effort by local residents and organisations to breathe life into shared spaces for culture and play, resulted in the elimination of the Flemish nationalists from the local vestiges of power. A re-invigorated neighbourhood life resulted in improved social cohesion, suggesting that citizens and other local actors together can create better futures for their neighbourhoods and craft new futures, using the socio-political complexity of living together to the advantage of all concerned.

Also ranked on top of the list of local election themes in Antwerp was mobility, a reminder of the attention paid to urban infrastructure by the statisticians quoted earlier. Due to its large industrial port and the accompanying petrochemical industry and road network, Antwerp has grave issues with air pollution. A citizen's movement for putting the main ring road (one of the busiest in the world) under a green roof has been active for almost a decade. During the election campaign 'Ringland' and 'Breathless' events were regular hotspots for candidates to recruit voters. Notwithstanding the rise of the Flemish green party in these local elections, other environmental issues were largely absent from the debates. Somehow, resilience in the face of climate change is a topic for when there is no other news. This may be particular to Antwerp. Ghent, the next most populated city in Flanders after Antwerp, is working at becoming fossil-fuel-free over the next 32 years. That effort may not be nearly enough but at least the grand challenge is being looked in the eye here. Big in your face questions about energy however were largely absent from election debates in Antwerp, despite possible power outages in Flanders having been announced for the winter and frequent news items about cracks and leaks in the nuclear power plant of Doel, just 25 kilometres away from the city centre. The exploitation of powerplants and electricity distribution is a local, regional and federal responsibility with international dimensions (the vast majority of energy used in Belgium is imported). City authorities in this case cannot independently formulate their own policies. As the balance between environmental and economic needs becomes ever more precarious, and the contradictions more pressing, this *modus operandi* will have to change if we are to secure any kind of city futures.

Election candidates know that all roads lead to the economy. They underline its significance, pointing to employment (in the port and its adjacent industries as well as the city centre), talking about the cost of living and the spending power of local authorities. At the same time, fundamental economic questions are rarely addressed during election times. The growth paradigm is taken for granted by every single one of the large parties, including the Greens. The tension between ecology and economy or the contradictions between the needs and desires of large businesses and those of local wage labourers are rarely addressed. Economic thinking beyond the self-interest of everyone involved is shunned for being far too technical and complex. It is considered a highly specialised topic and will probably be the last to be included in any kind of efforts towards the polylogues of participatory democracy that 'citizenlists' encourage. As any city's existence today and tomorrow is closely tied into its economic functions and attractiveness, it is worrying to see how little of the basic discussion about economic principles and policies actually takes place in the local context.

Obviously, questions about futures of cities cannot be limited to a focus on any single one of the emblematic characteristics or issues suggested from historical, statistical or everyday-life perspectives. The web of internal and external relations that make a city does not lend itself to being untangled, it is not just complicated but decidedly complex. The contradictions between one city and the next and, within a single city between one neighbourhood and the next, may be readily observable but escape any kind of quick resolution. The dynamic processes of the flow of human bodies, goods and services, ideas and sentiments in cities are not just multi-directional. Layer upon layer, their competition for access and priority renders the overall picture of what goes on in a city, highly chaotic. When complexity, contradictions and chaos begin to overlap like this, it is the hallmark of what is called 'postnormal change'. For deliberation on the futures of cities, these and other concepts of postnormal times theory (PNT) may provide some important clues.

Postnormal thinking suggests a focus on a set of interlinked drivers of change: acceleration, networked connectivity and globalisation. They can be used to recognise some of the multi-dimensional challenges that cities may face in their futures. The UN statistics above, may not provide

exclusive or exhaustive definitions of cities but the time series they deliver, do clearly demonstrate a sharp acceleration in the growth of cities, both in size and number. The UN states that ‘the urban population of the world has grown rapidly from 751 million in 1950 to 4.2 billion in 2018’. In other words, in the last seven decades this population’s size has grown more than five times. That is almost unimaginable and a major change that affects all life on earth to a massive extent. The UN suggest that this trend will continue for several more decades at least. In the next 32 years, it projects, the number of urban dwellers will continue to rise, growing by another 2.5 billion, so that they will represent more than two thirds of the human population on the planet by 2050. The question is how we deal with this rapid evolution. Can we adapt our ways, learn quickly enough to provide safety and wellbeing for all in such precipitously changing circumstances? Will we take the time to sit down together and consider our options in ongoing and inclusive polylogues?

The term polylogue was originally coined by the Bulgarian-French literary critic, Julia Kristeva, in her book with the same title. Futurists Ziauddin Sardar and John Sweeney suggest that polylogues ‘require the creation of new physical and mental spaces where diversity, pluralism, and contending perspectives are present on their own terms but also deeply invested in engaging others in creating and sharing information and knowledge’.

Will city dwellers even have the disposition to engage in such a demanding endeavour? The acceleration of life in the city itself may play an important role here. The pressures of a fast-paced urban culture are suspected to lead to structural failures, personal and communal crises of all kinds, similar to the *Future Shock* effects described by the late American popular futurist Alvin Toffler. I found an example in the city-state of Singapore, recognised for its transition from third world to first world in a single generation and for the extent of its technological innovation capacity. It is home to 5.4 million people. Even as it is counted among the ‘smartest cities’ in the world, it is seen to hold on to the old accepted norms of the standards, routines and work practices of the manufacturing economy. Kenneth Goh of the Ivey Business School in Canada, and who was the recipient of a Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship, suggests that Singapore is in dire need of ‘productive slowing down’. Think about collectively unlearning the inclination for striving to get ahead of one another, kicking

the habit of constantly seeking to outpace the other as individuals or businesses. Goh argues that the Singaporean workforce's perception of being trapped in a race 'discourages experimentation, discovery and learning from trial and error, in favour of uniform thought processes and reproducing scripted responses.' He believes that maintaining a simplistically fast pace is unsustainable for Singaporeans and he is concerned that as a consequence of being hung up on speed, Singapore will suffer from a lack of visionaries, creative thinkers and collaborators - precisely the kind of contributors it will need to be able to navigate postnormal change.

The acceleration of city life is closely linked to its increasingly networked nature and the inter- and intra-connectivity that this brings. Evidently, today connectivity is given by the possibilities of advancing information and communication technologies but that is no reason to ignore the significance of physical internal networks such as roads and public transport, water pipes and electricity, crisscrossing Antwerp or Singapore. Researcher Dan Penny of the University of Sidney recently issued a warning about the resilience of such physically connecting infrastructure. He studied the factors contributing to the fall of the Cambodian city Angkor in the fifteenth century. At one time it was the biggest city in the world. It had a well-developed network of connecting canals, fosses, dams, reservoirs and natural rivers. This extended over more than a thousand square kilometres and served as an irrigation network and as a defence against floods. The city collapsed at a time when intense monsoon rains were alternated with exceptionally dry periods. Resulting sediments in the smaller waterways and erosion of the larger ones combined to cause irreparable damage and bring the city down. Penny cautions that the challenges Angkor faced are similar to those of contemporary city networks in conditions of climate change and related extreme weather phenomena.

To ensure the futures of the cities of today, it is important to keep in mind that as cities grow, their infrastructure becomes more complex. As a consequence, it also becomes increasingly likely that these physical networks will at some point reach a critical state that cannot be foreseen by those who manage them on a daily basis. A minor error or dropout can then result in a much larger problem. There is a reason why electricity black-outs are on the agenda this winter, even in one of the most

prosperous nations of the world like Belgium. For cities to have any futures at all, they will have to construct resilience by creating more independence between different parts of their physical networks and build in surplus capacity. The investments needed to do so may threaten other much needed expenditures. The question is how we might come to prioritising costs to defend us against unpredicted (and unpredictable) phenomena. If we can't see exactly what is coming, will we be inclined to put up the defences we may need to survive. Or will climate change remain a black elephant (one of three potentialities of postnormal times, which also include the black swan and the black jelly fish) – ignored till it crushes us?

Just like running water and electricity and the coming and going of trucks, containerships and tankers, full of (non-)essentials, digital connectivity is a determining feature of contemporary city environments. The implications of urban activities linked across the globe in real time, of the capacity of knowledge workers to cut down on commuting time by working from home, of how the flow of traffic is controlled from smart hubs, cannot be underestimated. Digital connectivity in cities includes an array of mobile applications, services and media channels that contribute to how we do all things, economic, social and personal. How digital connectivity is big (data) business, how it is the object of state control, how it affects social relations, working hours and global finance, how power is reproduced and subverted through its creation and its use, and how digital divides remain while digital connectivity becomes ubiquitous - all these questions have a strong reciprocal relation with questions about the present and futures of cities.

Digital connectivity defines our era, just as much as the rise of mega cities does. In the extended present, the two combined presents an impressive range of challenges. They have to do with the social well-being of humans when they replace face-to-face encounters with virtual chitchat and big data. They include the unintended consequences of congestion and poor air-quality in the streets suggested as shortcuts by the apps people use to plot inner-city journeys. The extended present begs attention for privacy and commodification, for culture and entertainment and for all that we can see coming. *Familiar images of the future* related to advances in information and communication technologies in cities, include the ubiquitous and oppressive personalised advertising seen in films like *Minority Report* (2002)

and *The Fifth Element* (1997) as well as the potential for organising citizens in protests and uprisings, as seen in the Occupy movement or the Arab Spring. Moving towards whole new *unthought futures*, brings experts and housewives, their children and grandparents together. Call them stakeholders, actors, community members, audiences or members of the public, users, consumers, experts, theoreticians, critics, politicians, practitioners. Call them people! Contemporary experiments and projects with extended peer communities with attention for what might be possible, what is needed and wanted, what can be afforded, what to have or do and how, cannot omit 'what for' and 'for what world'.

Digital connectivity itself is exceptionally suited to channel such deliberative and co-creative efforts of all kinds. 'Hot mint' will be needed to lubricate the convivial spaces where we can look each other in the eye when we have to recognise that your needs and my desires can very easily be mutually exclusive. We will need social technologies and 'orgware', the ability to build capacity and adopt and adjust to change, as much, if not more, than hardware or software. We will have to work intensively for the constant revision of and clarity on values to practice and protect so as to keep our cities and ourselves liveable. Rigour and audacity, new forms and combinations are needed to look forward in conditions of seemingly limitless potential for disaster as well as brilliance.

Far reaching globalisation still raises the stakes. Urban geographers and economic analysts draw intricate maps of the flows of goods and services, finance and people that have existed throughout the world's history. In practice today, the bulk of these flows exist between cities. We are talking about a form of connectivity again, one that has taken on an unprecedented scale, closely binding together the major and minor cities of today. Flows like air-traffic and overseas container shipping or the copper and fiberoptic cables beneath our oceans, contribute considerably to the realities of all our cities. What takes place at stock exchanges and in newsrooms, the movements of refugees from war-torn or climate disaster regions, the implementation of ideas tried out in one city and applied in another, all these constitute flows between cities around the globe.

University College, London, environmental planners Michael Batty and James Cheshire underline the varied nature of flows: 'any kind of change might be treated as a flow, from physical, social, or electronic transactions

through to changes caused by aging, regeneration, economic growth, and so on.' Such flows can be described starting from the perspective of fixed locations – cities – where changes take place as a result of a perpetual varied stream in and out. It is also possible to describe how attributes or components that are flowing change along their trajectory, independent of departure or arrival points. Both frames are needed simultaneously. Cities then are not merely the physical departure and arrival points of flows. Flows of information, artefacts, services, money or goods extend the cities beyond their physical or administrative boundaries. Like Manuel Castells, Batty and Cheshire emphasise that cities are not defined by their physical space. Cities can be understood as the dynamic processes that take place within and between them. Cities are flows in and off themselves and so are their futures.

Picture a city, thirty years from now. Start with the faces of people, their figures, their posture and the clothes they wear. Think of the town halls that are the scene of heated debates between them. This city could be my home town, perhaps a mega-city in Asia, it could be in Latin or North America too. Walk along the borders of what used to be a nation and see how it has become a single Metropolitan area. Discover the tiny houses and the mobile units, the communities that turned rabbit cage social housing into co-housing arrangements, the lofts on the 67th floor elsewhere. See the children play in the park under the shade of trees, check out the CO2 filters. Find the graffiti by respected artists on the water tanks and windmills. Stop at the castle where new arrivals congregate. Look at grannies tending to vegetables and herbs in the common allotment by the railway. Find the arts centre in the old factory by the river where rhythms and rhymes and tones of human history are mixed. Take me to a polylogue under a rooftop on the protective dike along the embankment. Forget the bullet-holes if you can. Flow with the futures of cities.