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Public Space in the New Urban Agenda.
The Challenge of Implementation

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The New Urban Agenda – the landmark 2016 agreement for sustainable urban development that has now been adopted by consensus by 193 nations – contains no fewer than nine paragraphs extensively discussing the importance of public space. Among other things, the document describes public spaces as "drivers of social and economic development," "enhancing safety and security, favoring social and inter-generational interaction and the appreciation of diversity" and "promoting walkability and cycling towards improving health and well-being." There is also language on the role of public space in enhancing ecological sustainability and resilience, on equity and opportunity, on connectivity and social inclusion, on cultural expression and dialogue, and on broader human development (United Nations, 2017).

More fundamentally, the document recognizes that public spaces are the essential framework for sustainable urbanization – a point also made by the Secretary-General of Habitat III, Dr. Joan Clos:

> *"The principal question… is the relationship in a city between public space and buildable space. This is the art and science of building cities – and until we recover this basic knowledge, we will continue to make huge mistakes."*
> (Clos, 2016)

Clos' reference to "huge mistakes" echoes an alarming trend in urbanization: research is showing clearly that, even as urbanization rates are reaching historic high levels, public space is declining rapidly, in both quantity and quality. This is happening with so-called "market rate" development – which is increasingly auto-dominated, privatized, gated, and otherwise inward-turning – and also with informal settlements, where as many as one-quarter of all urban residents live (UN-Habitat, 2018). In both cases, we are losing this essential "relationship between public space and buildable space."

The question is, then, how can we recover this "basic knowledge"? How can we proceed to implement the goals of the New Urban Agenda, and the related Sustainable Development Goals and their targets -- notably SDG 11.7, which calls for adequate public space per person? How can we develop the tools and strategies necessary to overcome barriers and improve the quantity, quality, connectivity, and equitable distribution, of public space? This is an enormous remaining challenge ahead – and one that increasingly appears essential to the goals of sustainable urban development.

The authors' involvement in this work dates from 2013, when we convened the first Future of Places conference in Stockholm, Sweden, as a partnership of Ax:son Johnson Foundation, Project for Public Spaces, and UN-Habitat. The four-year forum brought together over 1,500 researchers, practitioners, officials and activists, representing more than 700 organizations, 275 cities and 100 countries from all around the world. Our goal from the outset was to explore the importance of public space as a major pillar of the then-developing New Urban Agenda, and to provide some insight on the pathways to implementation. The series (and related collaborative documents, meetings and consultations) produced a set of "key messages" that contributed to the language of the New Urban Agenda (UN-Habitat, 2015).

Now that the agenda has been agreed, we have moved into the challenge of implementation -- particularly the need to assemble systems for knowledge-sharing and action in specific (often quite varied) localities, under very different legal, economic and cultural circumstances. To do that, we've inaugurated a new research center based at KTH University, and drawing on a much wider network of researchers, policy experts, officials, practitioners and activists, to address the challenge. We, together with other "federated" networks of collaborators, will need to work closely together to move forward. We will need to self-organize within our own communities, and at the same time, coordinate carefully with one another at the more global levels.

That task was very much the focus of the Ninth World Urban Forum in Kuala Lumpur in early February of 2018 – the first forum since the adoption of the NUA, and the first to examine the specific issues of implementation. For one week in early February 2018, over 25,000 participants from all 193 countries gathered in Kuala Lumpur to take up the challenges, forging partnerships and developing pilot projects.

We all recognized that "business as usual" poses an overwhelming barrier. Current economic incentives and disincentives reward efforts to minimize public space, while penalizing – at least in the short term – efforts to create larger and more robust public spaces and public-space networks, including walkable streets. Regulatory tools to address the issue are often after-the-fact, clumsy, and inefficient. We need better tools and approaches. We need to reform the old defective models that are profitable in the short term, but dysfunctional or even catastrophic in the long term. This work is especially urgent in a time of unprecedented urban growth.

At the current rapid rates of urbanization – on track to build more urban fabric in the next 50 years than has been created in all of humanity up to now – the implications are simply unacceptable, and reform is urgent. This is true for all of urbanism and its quality, but it is particularly true for the framework of public space. It is public space that has a necessary relation to walkability, to livable compactness, to opportunities for improved health, to expanded economic opportunity, to reduced use of automobiles and other ecological impacts, and in turn to the crucial efforts to mitigate the grim prospects of resource depletion, pollution and climate change.

In all these issues, fragmented, resource-intensive, ecologically destructive urbanization – in a word, sprawl – plays a fundamental role. By contrast, walkable, mixed urbanism, organized around well-connected public space systems, also plays a fundamental role in mitigating those same trends (Mehaffy, 2015).

While we have good reason to be alarmed about the trends of sprawling urbanization, we must also recognize that there are many positive effects of urbanization – greatly improved health and sanitation, opportunities to escape crushing poverty and its ills, more opportunities for women, better opportunities for human development in general. But these benefits are in scarce supply in those cities that are urbanizing without good-quality public space – and as our research and others' has shown, this is not a coincidence.

The result is that much of the urbanization that is happening today does not afford to many of its new residents the benefits that good-quality urbanism actually offers for human development. Instead, we are too often getting "urbanization without urbanism": gated enclaves, automobiles and inward-turning malls for middle- and upper-income groups, and slum-like conditions of deprivation and limited access for others. This is certainly not consistent with the goal of "cities for all" in the New Urban Agenda.

As it turns out, this state of affairs is not even good for the middle class and wealthy, at least in the long run. As much of the new research in economic networks is demonstrating, urban economies, like other networks, get their power from the number of nodes that are plugged in to the network. As our Colleague Luis Bettencourt has observed, to the extent that some parts of the network are cut off and unable to participate, that puts a drag on the performance of the network as a whole. We see this most obviously in the increased cost of healthcare, policing, prisons and the like. Less visible is the economic contribution that could have been made by huge numbers of people who are cut off, their participation diminished (Bettencourt, 2013).

There is also a strong corollary in Jane Jacobs' emphasis on diversity, not only as a matter of social justice, but no less so, one of economic vitality. Cities that fail to maintain diversity (like Detroit in the era of the automotive "company town") set themselves up for stagnation and decline. The approach is unsustainable in a fundamental economic sense – and in social and environmental ones too.

Why is public space so important to other economic and social processes? At the World Urban Forum, we asked that question to Luis Bettencourt, who replied:

> *"Public space is central. In many ways, you can think of cities ultimately as really a bunch of strangers coming together to do difficult things – things that are very contested, and require continuous interaction, and a set of rules and spaces that allow that to happen. Public spaces are a very visible and very important part of where those encounters and those negotiations occur, and both serendipities and then also organizations come to be. I think that in the work that you're doing, but also increasingly as new ways of thinking about cities, we think about public spaces for what they do, not just as places that we build in certain specific ways… but in terms of their quality, how they bring people together, how people feel in them, and how open to different kinds of people and different kinds of interaction they are."*
> (Bettencourt, 2018)

Our picture of cities is changing, says Bettencourt, from a simplistic notion that "that's where the jobs are" to an understanding of why the jobs are there – cities are "social reactors" that offer the ability to form contacts and exchanges, and to develop within the

essential framework of public space, along with the many private spaces that are connected to it.

Of course we can replace public space with a privatized series of capsules – the capsule of the house, connected by the capsule of the car, to the capsule of the workplace, and so on. Instead of public spaces, one would only have workplace meeting spaces, conferences, the Internet and so on. In essence, that is the system we have adopted since the mid-Twentieth Century up to today, and it has been phenomenally powerful in its own way. We can certainly understand why some people find it attractive.

But this system is fatally flawed. It requires massive injections of resources to sustain it, and we are rapidly depleting those resources. Moreover, it incurs other kinds of costs too, "externality costs" that don't manifest until later in the cycle, like pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, declines in health, increasing burdens on the elderly, the young and the infirm, and many other related problems.

Then too there are the heavy (if often hidden) costs of exclusion. Not everyone has a car and can participate in that kind of urban economy, or has access to work, or the means to generate new work. Large numbers of people are left behind in this kind of city, and, again, aside from social justice, there is a heavy cost to all the members of society, not only in lost opportunities, but in direct impacts as we discussed before (like healthcare costs, crime, etc).

For these and other converging reasons, then, it increasingly appears that the "public space agenda" lies at the core of a hopeful kind of "sustainable pathway" to human development, and that is why it needs to be at the center of our efforts.

But how can we take up the challenge? In Kuala Lumpur we conducted a session to help answer that question, titled "Public Space in the New Urban Agenda: Research Into Implementation." The panelists included Laura Petrella (Leader of the City Planning, Extension and Design Unit, UN-Habitat), Kyle Farrell (Visiting Faculty, Harvard University, USA), Setha Low (Professor of Anthropology and Environmental Psychology, Public Space Research Group, City University of New York), Hai Dinh Dang (Senior Project Officer, Livable Cities Project, HealthBridge Vietnam), Ibrahim Maiga (Coordinator, Peaceful Roads, Niger), and Michael Mehaffy, moderator (project leader, Centre for the Future of Places at KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm SE). Also participating as front-row participants were Ethan Kent (Vice-President, Project for Public Spaces, USA), Luisa Bravo (Co-Editor of The Journal of Public Space, City Space Architecture, Italy), Mirko Guaralda (Co-Editor of The Journal of Public Space, Queensland University of Technology, Australia), and Ben Bolgar (Senior Director, The Prince's Foundation for Building Community, UK)

In the session we discussed an evolving model of small, feasible public space pilot projects, working with key partners in strategic locations. These projects can be scaled up as they become successful, demonstrating the value of public space for the residents, and for local governments, businesses and other partners. From these pilot projects, larger masterplanning frameworks could be developed, leading ultimately to new national policies on the development of more and better public spaces.

In this model, our role at the Centre for the Future of Places would be primarily to offer a local "research arm" to the implementation partners – providing research on best practices, and also conducting (in partnership with local universities and others) field research to uncover strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in each locale. Coming out of each project, we would share the findings with other locales, who could then adapt them to their own specific conditions and limitations.

*Fig. 1. Michael Mehaffy at the 9th World Urban Forum, during the session
'Public Space in the New Urban Agenda: Research Into Implementation'.*

One of our proposed pilot projects is in Da Nang, Vietnam, where our partner, HealthBridge, is proposing to develop new public spaces in partnership with the City and others. This follows successful work they have already done in Hanoi and Hoi An, Vietnam. The City in turn is eager to see the benefits of this work scale up, perhaps into a city-wide masterplan. The national government has also expressed a strong interest, and asked us to provide commentary in their new national urbanization policy document. Of course, each locality has its own mix of opportunities and constraints, and in each case, all of the potential barriers and incentives need to be considered. In each case, revisions or alternatives may need to be found. This is the hard work of reform of the many barriers and constraints, like obsolete zoning codes, traffic engineering standards, bank lending rules, and myriad other elements of the "operating system for growth." Some of these barriers and constraints are universal (like the dynamics of global real estate investment) and some are locally unique (like local ordinances and customs). Often, however, these elements have enough in common that sharing of tools and strategies can be enormously helpful. That is one of our goals.

Another goal is to build a knowledge base of research findings about public space, and the benefits on offer for those who improve their quantity and quality, as well as the issues that must be managed and accommodated in public space projects. To that end, we have begun to develop a "public space research database" with key research literature from a number of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, environmental psychology, economics, ecology, urban design, and other fields. This resource can be of value in providing the initial consultation for those seeking to develop a pilot project. In turn, the various pilot projects might themselves offer useful field research to add to the literature, and to the database specifically. Such a "virtuous circle" approach, connecting research to practice and back to research, should be helpful for both the state of practice, and for the research literature as well.

The research emphasizes one finding that should be encouraging to us all. We do know how to make public spaces – and cities – that are thriving, successful, equitable, and sustainable (because they have sustained). We have done it innumerable times

throughout human experience. Perhaps our biggest obstacle, then, is in our own attitudes from the recent past – mired in a now-obsolete way of seeing the world. As Dr. Clos says, the essential problem before us is simply this: to recover this lost art and science of building cities.

This is not simply a matter of reverting to older top-down models of design. Rather, as we discussed in the session, it is a matter of building the capacity of people to act as co-producers within their own public spaces, which in turn means the public spaces must be truly open, and truly public. The very good news, however, is that research does show (as we recently wrote for another research publication) that public spaces offer the capacity to support a complex agenda of livability and sociability, economic prosperity, community cohesion, social justice, and overall sustainability for cities.

The New Urban Agenda is undoubtedly a historic achievement, if only a first step down a very long road of implementation. It does express the proposition, supported by considerable evidence, that the cities that will do best in the long run will be those that best support an open, equitable public realm, and leverage its benefits for all those who utilize those places.

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