

An Alternative Urban World is Possible

A DECLARATION FOR URBAN RESEARCH AND ACTION

International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA)

January 2003



An urban world

Cities are home to more than half of the world's population. Urbanization rates in the global South continue to rise as rural in-migration reaches new heights due to displacement, droughts, and shifts in global markets. While urbanization in the global North (or West) has slowed in terms of population growth, the metropolitan centres of industrial countries are still sprawling across their regional hinterlands towered over by even denser central business districts and edge cities.

Demand 1:

Disempower global players



(All illustrations by Bellefair Urbanistik Toronto)

A global city

The current period of urbanization is global. It occurs everywhere on earth and, as a material process, is a tangible representation of globalization. Urbanization now means linking urban worlds across a variety of scales from the sub-local to the global. Globalization occurs at all city sizes but also leads to the formation of distinct new spaces of accumulation of money, commodities and power.

Among these new spaces are global cities, international trade zones and flexible production complexes. In the uneven distribution of the effects of globalization in various parts of the world and at different scales, the colonialist and imperialist legacy continues to determine the relationships between Northern and Southern cities, and what the North does has severe impacts on the South.

Migrant cities

In-migration from the South to the North is occurring as people search for better conditions of life and as millions escape from wars, economic and environmental crisis and social or political repression. However immigrants too often find exploitation, racism, repression, and exclusion. The urban world, both in the North and in the South, is more and more characterized by social polarization, spatial segregation and legal disintegration (*sans papiers*). Basic social needs are not met for a growing part of the population. Wealth and poverty continue to be geographically differentiated as expressed in segmented housing, public and social spaces, health services, education, access to basic resources such as land, water, and food).

**Demand 2:
Make profits
unsustainable**



Unsustainable urban-natural relations

The globalization of urbanization has created unprecedented pressures on urban natural environments, the health of humans and the sustainability of human-natural relations. Pollution levels, energy consumption, waste generation continue to rise in the North, as cities still deal with the legacies of the industrial era such as contaminated soils, degraded watersheds and bioregions. In the South, the basic metabolic processes such as urban hydrosocial cycles and regional airsheds are corrupted beyond imagination and perhaps beyond repair. Everywhere in the urban world, albeit to different degrees and in different ways, there have been grave violations of environmental justice.

Neoliberalization: The market rules

The globalization of our cities has coincided with a pervasive neoliberalization of governments, markets, and civil societies at all scales. This has meant that gov-

Demand 3: No borders for people



ernance, service delivery, and planning have been marketized, privatized, and de-regulated. Cities are viewed as private corporations locked in a global competition with few rules and little protection for local and regional interests and popular demands. Simultaneously, citizens are being recast as clients, and urban politics comes under the spell of the abstract rhetoric of economics and fiscal prudence rather than the concrete goals of social justice and community well-being.

Attacks on democracy

Liberal democracies, such as those in the West, have more often than not been mere smokescreens for and facilitators of class rule in capitalist societies. In the period of neo-liberalization, the relationships between democracy and capitalism got even worse. Now democratic institutions and political processes of self-regulation are either instrumentalized or entirely abandoned in favour of so-called efficiency, flexibility, and lean administration. In the countries of the West, a power shift has occurred from accountable forms of representative democracy and welfare state institutions to private modes of governance, shareholder democracy and open oppression. In the process, citizens, workers, and residents have lost control over the globalized mechanisms that govern their lives. In transitional and developing countries, neoliberalization has meant shifting all attempts to create viable and powerful social and political institutions to check the unfettered powers of global markets. Local governments have often become the ones doing the dirty work of globalization and acting as the block busters in fights over contracting out and privatizing of public services, one of the main mantras of the neoliberal consensus.

Community vulnerability

Economic globalization has increased the vulnerability of local communities to the rules and whims of world markets, transnational corporations and free market trade agreements. As a consequence, life in cities both in the North and in

the South has become less secure, more expensive and increasingly unhealthy. Marginalization, homelessness and unemployment has led to widespread despair. Simultaneously, the communities of the wealthy have prospered, as they have barricaded themselves in gated housing complexes protected by private police forces and serviced solely by the market place. Cities have come to be expected to subsidize global corporations in doing their business whereas social services have been defunded and local states have increasingly moved to concentrate on expanding their police forces, penitentiary systems and other forms of social control.

Demand 4:

Autonomy and social justice in everyday life



Racism on the rise

Globalizing cities are diverse. Yet, as racism, ethnic violence and intolerance have become natural ingredients of the neoliberal global order, forms of social organization based on solidarity among communities of urban residents and workers have come under attack both ideologically and physically. Whereas cities have often been the laboratories of progressive social experiment, democratization, autonomy, collective organization and urban liberation, they have now come to be associated more frequently with dystopic forms of hate-filled politics and more or less organized populist or even fascist violence.

The Alternative: INURA's urban imagination:

The neo-liberal project itself cannot be unified and leaves cracks for us to sow our seeds of resistance. Not all cities experience the same degree of commodification of social reproduction and collective consumption, militarization of public space, and deterioration of general living conditions. Many cities in some nations continue to operate on the assumption of the viability of welfare state policies and more collective forms of solutions to mounting social and environmental problems. An important role has been played by the current urban mobilizations in many places from Porto Alegre to Quebec City, and from Seattle to Genoa. The meeting in Porto Alegre and the mobilizations against capitalist globalization have shown the growing presence of movements and action groups located in different parts of the world that join in the fight against neoliberalism and war. They are combining resistance with living and creative alternatives that are under construction and place themselves in the perspective of a new world freed from exploitation, discrimination, dispossession, and violence. These mass events, and other ongoing initiatives at many scales, create potentially new horizons for urban social change be-

yond both the Fordist past and the neoliberal present. This change of direction goes along with redefined political communities that defy both the traditional welfare state (where it existed) and neoliberal, asocial individualization. We may witness and advocate the emergence of a new model of urbanity that far exceeds the mere structures of state and corporate economy and remakes the way we live our life in cities and the fundamental assumptions we make about this life.

INURA's urban imagination is fundamentally opposed to and in struggle with the neo-liberal urban project the contours of which we have described above. Based on the hopeful experiences in the shadows of the globalization and neoliberalization of our cities, we are proposing enthusiastically the construction of a new global urban world based on the solidarity and cooperation of human collectives in justice, democracy, and harmony with non-human nature. We emphatically defend radical and redistributive notions of social and environmental justice, equality of opportunity and rights to diversity. We understand these substantive rights to be enmeshed with the liberation of decision making processes, particularly enhancing the participation of all relevant parties in decision making and modes of collective (self) organization that avoid unjust hierarchies and discrimination.

Demand 5: Liberate the urban imagination



INURA sees it as its mandate to support the liberation of urban everyday life from the false demands and constrictions of neoliberal globalization. This, in other words, is fulfilling the promise of the “right to the city”.

This is not the place to present the myriad forms in which INURA members in cities across the globe have been active and involved in political and planning projects to this end. A glimpse of these activities can be gained from two volumes reporting on the rich experiences of research and struggle INURA has accumulated in the past decade: Inura (eds.) *Possible Urban Worlds: Urban Strategies at the End of the 20th Century* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1998) and *The Contested Metropolis. Seven Cities at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Basel, Berlin, Boston: Birkhäuser, forthcoming). Please also refer to the INURA Principles that can be viewed on our website at www.inura.org.

Generated, discussed, and agreed upon at the INURA annual meeting in Clinchamps sur Orne, France, June 22, 2002