

POLITICS, POWER, CITIES

By Enrique Penalosa

In an excerpt from 'The Endless City', Enrique Peñalosa describes the urgent need for governments to create socially inclusive and well-designed public spaces and cities.

There is not a scientifically or technically correct or incorrect way of making a city. Defining what makes a good city is more a matter of heart and soul than of engineering. It is more akin to an art than to a science. Yet, despite the subjective nature of urbanism, a government must adopt a vision and promote it, make decisions, build, define rules and enforce them – it must not only envision but also enact the city. If a good city is society's collective work of art, then its government acts as the piece's conductor and often its composer as well.

Urbanism has to do with community and society decisions, enforced through some form of government. It is not possible to leave it up to private entrepreneurs whether there should be pavements or how wide they should be, how tall buildings should be, whether there should be parks and, if yes, where or how big they should be, and whether there should be a mixture of residential and commercial buildings. The fact that government intervention is essential, together with the reality that there are multiple possible designs for a city, makes urbanism one of the few remaining realms of ideology.

In actual urban environments, Adam Smith's notion that individuals seeking their own benefit brings about the best for society as a whole is not always valid. An entrepreneur may want to build a high-rise building in the midst of a three-storey townhouse neighbourhood; but it is also a logical individual decision to drive to work in the comfort of one's private car, yet if all the residents of a large city were to do that, it would end in a traffic jam. Should the owner of rural land near a city be allowed to do whatever he wants with it, including, for example, use it to build a low-density gated community,

far from the reach of public transport? How should scarce road space be distributed between pedestrians, bicycles, buses and cars? It would seem that public transport should be given priority over private cars in the allocation of road space, if democracy and the public good are to prevail.

There are at least two types of equality we can realistically strive for in our time: the first is equality in quality of life, particularly for children. All children should have the same opportunities to develop their potential and be happy, have access to green spaces and play areas, to libraries and waterfronts. The second kind of equality – which is still within our reach – is to make truly effective the principle that the public good must prevail over private interest. The first article in every constitution stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law. Consequently, some state explicitly that the public good must prevail over private interest. In cities the interests of a few individuals often conflict with those of the community as a whole. It is the role of politics and governmental institutions to manage those conflicts and find ways of promoting inclusion and social justice.

According to the United Nations, there will be nearly 2.8 billion new inhabitants in cities in developing countries over the next 40 years. Yet the growth of those cities will be more than proportional to their population growth for the following reasons: households will have fewer members and thus more dwellings will be needed for the same amount of people; more economic development means that institutional buildings take up a larger share of city space; and, people demand larger homes as their income grows. It is in cities in developing countries that many of the core urban and environmental challenges are

concentrated in this century. And issues of equality and inclusion are particularly relevant there, as their societies are highly unequal. Inequality and exclusion can be even more painful than poverty, but the way we create and organise cities may be a powerful instrument in constructing equality and social justice.

Public space dedicated to pedestrians can be a means to a more inclusive society. During work time the highest executive and the lowest-ranking employee may be equally satisfied or dissatisfied; in public space they both meet colleagues and do their jobs. It is only during leisure time that an abyss separates their quality of life. The upper-income executive goes home to a large house, probably with a garden, has access to sports clubs, country houses, restaurants, expensive cultural activities and trips abroad. The low-income person and his or her children live in a very small dwelling and the only alternative to television for spending their leisure time is public space accessible for pedestrians. Pavements, bicycle lanes, plazas, parks, promenades, waterfronts and sports facilities show respect for human dignity and begin at least to compensate for inequality in other realms.

Access to green spaces may be the most formidable barrier to inclusion, not only now but also in the future. Until recently, few people believed the poor would own refrigerators, ordinary telephones, much less mobile ones, colour televisions, washing machines or sophisticated hi-fi systems, all of which are becoming common, even in lower-income homes in developing countries. Lower-income citizens will soon all have access to computers and a wide array of electronic equipment. What they will not have is access to green spaces and sports facilities – unless governments act today. Neglecting to acquire and secure open spaces today is not something that can be remedied easily in the future. It would be extremely difficult to purchase and demolish hundreds of buildings in order to create green spaces. And lacking such spaces severely affects quality of life, inclusion and as a result the legitimacy of social organisation. Beyond the basic public pedestrian space, which should be found throughout the city, a good city should have at least one, and ideally several, ‘grand’ public spaces. That is to say, spaces of such quality that

even the wealthiest members of society cannot avoid frequenting them.

A protected bicycle lane in a city in a developing country is a powerful symbol, showing that a citizen on a US\$ 30 bicycle is as important as one in a US\$ 30,000 car. A protected bicycle lane along every street is not a cute architectural fixture, but a basic democratic right – unless one believes that only those with access to a car have a right to safe mobility. Quality pavements and bicycle lanes show respect for human dignity, regardless of the level of economic development of a society. Many citizens in economically advanced societies cannot drive, because they are too young or too old, or because they have some kind of disability. A democratic city must be designed for the most vulnerable of its members.

It is with regards to transport that governments have most dramatically failed to comply with democratic principles in cities in developing countries. There is a fight for the scarce road space between cars and public transport, pedestrians and cyclists; and there is a battle for public funds between car owners demanding more road infrastructure and lower-income citizens demanding schools, sewage systems, housing, parks and other basic infrastructures. The minority of car owners usually command the most political clout and thus direct public investment to road infrastructure aimed at reducing peak-hour traffic jams, leaving the needs of the poor unattended. Both urban and rural roads ignore or take poor care of pedestrians’ and cyclists’ infrastructure needs.

There is no ‘natural’ level of car use in a city. Mature city governments such as those of Paris, New York, Tokyo, Berlin or London, explicitly or implicitly defined long ago that regardless of traffic conditions no more road infrastructure would be built in their core areas. Resources would be concentrated on public transport. If governments in Manhattan or Paris had built more and bigger roads, there would be increased car use in those cities. On the other hand, if these governments had built fewer or smaller roads, car use would have decreased there. In summary, it is the amount of infrastructure available for cars that determines the level of car use.

The governments of less-advanced cities are reluctant to make the inevitable decision: no more road infrastructure

in the built city. Resources will be concentrated not on more or bigger roads but on creating, expanding and improving public transport. From then on, car use must be restricted explicitly through means such as number plate-based use restrictions, tolls, parking limitations; or implicitly, through traffic. Many advanced cities have seen famous citizen battles against urban motorway projects. One of the most high-profile is Jane Jacobs' fight against the Lower Manhattan cross-town expressway. In most advanced cities today 'transport policy' really means finding ways of achieving lower levels of car use and a higher share for public transport, cycling and walking. In cities in developing countries 'transport policy' still largely means the opposite: how to facilitate more car use. In societies in developing countries, where less than 50 per cent of households do not have a car, having one is held as a visible certificate of belonging to society's higher echelons. Upper-income people in less-developed and highly unequal societies tend to see using public transport alongside lower-income citizens as an affront to their position in society. Although they gladly use public transport when they travel to more advanced countries, they rarely go near it in their own.

This partly because a city that makes too much room for fast-moving cars becomes less humane and loses quality of life, but also because road-infrastructure investments primarily benefiting higher-income citizens, redirect public funds away from schools, parks, housing and many other needs. The most vulnerable members of society, such as the poor, the elderly, children and disabled citizens, are not normally conscious of their interests and rights and do not have much political influence. A democratic government must act as their proxy and confront powerful minorities on their behalf. It must convince even upper-income groups that car-use restriction benefits them as well in the longer term. But in the end it must wield its decision-making power in order to implement its vision regardless of political costs.

A frequent source of inequality is the division of cities or metropolitan areas into several, sometimes dozens of municipalities. Unfettered market forces create a situation in which expensive neighbourhoods for wealthier citizens attract similar high-income developments around them. Land around high-income

developments tends to be expensive and normally low-income neighbourhoods will not be established there. The reverse is true too: a high-income housing development will not usually be developed next to a low-income one.

A healthy, large city will have both low- and high-income groups. Higher-income groups provide tax funds to tend to the needs of lower-income groups. They pay high taxes and often do not even use many services provided by the city: they use private healthcare services and their children go to private nurseries and private schools. Municipalities with lower-income citizens have a greater need of social services provided by government, yet no possibility to muster the necessary funds to provide them. Inequality ensues. Blunt extraction of funds from wealthier municipalities in order to transfer them to lower-income ones does not solve the problem: it has been found that those who spend funds not generated by themselves tend to do so inefficiently. To make matters worse, poorer citizens with lower levels of education tend to be easy prey to demagogues and corrupt politicians.

While there may be historical reasons for the existence of several municipalities within one city, once they are part of a large, modern metropolitan area there is little justification for them. Most citizens cross municipal borders unaware of their boundaries, except of course when the absurdity of such political subdivision is so extreme that public transport has to turn back at the border of the municipality, as happens in São Paulo. Long-term planning also becomes complicated when such subdivisions exist. Even the construction of a critical road artery or rail line becomes problematic. When different political parties control different municipalities, more problems arise, as has been the case in Mexico City. Bureaucratic expenses of many small municipalities are higher than those of one large one, and often the level of professional competence is lower within the smaller municipalities.

For these reasons Canada has merged nearly 1,000 municipalities over the last decade, achieving more social justice, lower bureaucratic expenses and better long-term planning. In Johannesburg several municipalities were also merged after the end of the

apartheid regime, in order to achieve greater equity. Higher-income citizens tend to oppose these mergers, as some of their funds will subsequently have to be redistributed to lower-income areas. Many small-town politicians also oppose them as they may end up in an unelectable position, or simply because they prefer to be, as the saying goes, the head of a mouse rather than the tail of a lion.

Innovations are always difficult to implement. The status quo is maintained through a majority support, while ideas for change start with only a minority behind them. Government must act on behalf of the majority and also of the most vulnerable members of society, but it must also act on behalf of future generations. It is not possible for governments to provide all citizens with individual goods, yet it is possible to provide quality public goods and services: schools, libraries, transport and green space. Moreover, once citizens achieve a certain income level, it is easier to increase well-being through public goods than through private goods: through a concert hall, a green area, a waterfront.

Inequality permeates everything around us so pervasively that it is difficult to differentiate between what is inevitable – or tolerable inequality – and that which could or should be altered. From today's perspective it seems that the social changes achieved by the French Revolution were obvious, almost natural, since the injustices redressed were so flagrant. However such injustices were not considered flagrant and not even evident before that moment in time. In the same way, we

are often not aware of many cases around us in which the public good does not prevail over private interest. Investments in flyovers to minimise traffic jams for upper-income groups seem normal. The poor in the same city might lack schools or basic sanitation and sometimes even clean water, while private waterfronts, pavement-less streets and urban roads abound. If we were truly rigorous in applying the prevalence of the public good, cities in developing countries would ban private car use during peak hours. Only a minority would be affected. Most people's travel would take less time and there would be less air pollution; less road building and maintenance would free up public funds for better provisions for the needs of lower-income majorities.

Most public policy discussions and decisions, such as those relating to macro-economics, are very short-lived. Even the most transcendental political events often do not affect people's lives as much as they are thought to. At the risk of appearing sacrilegious, it is for example irrelevant for the way people live today whether most countries' revolutions or wars of independence occurred 100 years earlier or later than they actually did. Instead, the way cities are built determines to a large degree citizens' quality of life for hundreds of years into the future.

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