

“Our Precious Resources: Cities as Spaces of Hope”



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Before I begin today's lecture, I wish to thank the following on behalf of all the participants in the Residency Programme: Thanks to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and its leadership for always supporting us. As a Humboldt fellow it is so nice for many of us to remain connected with academia in Germany through this residency. A big thanks to Tonja Klausmann for such wonderful coordination and being extremely patient with all of us. Your months and months of planning are already bearing very good fruits. And thanks to all the support organisations and institutions that have made this residency possible.

It is a moment of great honour for me today to deliver the Kosmos lecture and I hope I can live up to expectations.

Introduction

I am mounting this argument in favour of the city and the ideals that it represents. The city to my mind is amongst the most empowering and liberating of all human inventions. Yes, it is an invention from the point of view that it is an artificial construct. A complex amalgamation and juxtaposition of physical things, people, community and the state. No wonder Spiro Kostov liked to call the city *energised crowding*. It is this energy of the city which is both creative and frequently subversive that offers hope for the state we are in.

Yet, it might appear to be very contradictory to many of you. Cities have been associated with wasteful consumption, greenhouse emissions and they are known to have exploited the regions for their own self-interest. Yet I wish to make this argument that there is a strong possibility to change this narrative and to imagine cities as places that can offer far more hope for problems of climate change, hope for a more just society, and hope for more social cohesion.

Retreating to the picturesque countryside, living in the lap of nature, surrounding yourself with nature is not an option. As I will articulate in my talk soon, it is actually more indulgent and wasteful to live in the countryside which puts more strain on all forms of resources. So, rather than retreating into suburbs and surrounding ourselves with private nature, we should perhaps be living in cities together and *sharing nature*, preserving and protecting it.

But before I begin to unpack this complex relationship of cities with nature, let me first articulate how I define the city or rather what is the value of this phenomenon called a *city*.

Nature and Cities

Historically speaking, cities were impossible unless humankind tinkered with nature. We do know that cities only become possible when there is enough surplus from agriculture. But to create that kind of surplus one needs to control water.

The control of water in the form of establishing canals some 5,000 years back was the first major engineering project of that scale, was the first major modification of the natural conditions. And that very modification was central to the rise of cities.

Nature and Divinity

The *world outside* is fit only for animals, beasts, bandits but also sometimes the abode of the spiritual, the monks, the divinity. No wonder many Christian and Buddhist monasteries were not within the city but outside the city, in the lap of nature, in a forest where one could be in this contemplative reflective mood away from the material trappings of the city. So here is the contradiction. Cities have historically created conditions that are the binary opposite of the wild unpredictable nature outside of them and yet they need nature for their spiritual sustenance, they need nature to connect with their inner self, they will need nature as a guiding light.

Early Cities – Adjustment with Nature

Many of these earlier cities managed to achieve the delicate balance of ensuring the fulfilment of human needs, which are met through the built environment, yet ensuring the natural systems were not disturbed as much. The other remarkable feature of lots of these cities, especially the ones in South Asia, was the acknowledgement and celebration of natural resources in the form of creating public places around the flow and collection of water. So, the conveyance of water is not only a technical exercise but a community one. And by making the resources visible one begins to acknowledge their presence and the community understands the human relationship with the natural ones.

The Post-Enlightenment Period

The Enlightenment period, which begins here and spreads across the world, and the whole series of modern ideals and practices as we all know was the beginning of the major transformation of the whole world. So, at a very basic level, humans can proclaim that they understand the world; they are able to observe and decipher the rules of the natural world and now surely do not need the religious institution to explain this world to them. We are capable of understanding nature.

Colonisation of Nature and People

It is this colonial enterprise that was an outcome of post-Enlightenment era rationality, it was the natural outcome of the industrial revolution in Europe, and it was the natural outcome of the use of technology to dominate and control *people and nature*. And to my mind, the colonial and the industrial period marks a radical shift in the way cities begin to establish a completely new relationship with nature.

The Modern Movement

The modern movement was special in terms of the extremely radical ideas of city building; and also, the timing of the movement was such that it became the most important vehicle for nation building practically across the globe after the end of World War II. The 50s and early 60s were dominated by what we like to call the high modernist approach to city planning and design. And technology was central to the city building. Technology was crucial to bringing about new transformation and, in the process, creating a whole new society. Past, history and tradition were seen as a problem.

Cities after Globalisation

The cities post globalisation took things to a whole different level. With increasing privatisation of the real estate markets perhaps across the world, the cities now resemble large corporates wanting more investment, more tourists and more consumption. The cities have to be seductive to attract money and hence try hard to create a spectacle of themselves.

The Way Forward

Let me now propose some possible ideas or, rather, some conceptual frameworks that might make us think and approach the question of cities in a different manner. I must warn you though; I am operating at the level of conceptual models and new approaches. This is not to invalidate the present efforts towards making our cities more sustainable.

1. ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO CITY PLANNING RATHER THAN "GREEN" APPROACH

If one were to extend these ideas further what one would ideally like to see is a more ecological approach to city planning and not necessarily an approach that frames nature as a picturesque object for visual pleasure either.

An ecological approach to city planning and design in one, where the geographical context of the lands, the natural slopes of the ground, the flow of the water bodies, the soil, the moisture, the wildlife, flora and fauna are respected and cities built by adjusting to these conditions.

2. PASSIVE BUILDINGS RATHER THAN ACTIVE ONES

The second thing that could make our cities far better is making our buildings use less energy to build and far less energy to run. The first part of using building material with less captive energy is challenging and may take some time, but the second one is something that we must do really today for all the new buildings. Simply stop our buildings using far too much energy to remain warm or cool.

3. COMPACT CITIES RATHER THAN SPRAWLED URBANISM

One of the negative consequences of the garden city movement was a fascination with suburban living in the lap of nature. Whereas it does feel nice to surround yourself in the suburb with your private garden and lots of nature around, it takes a lot of resources to service the land that is sprawled in the suburbs, that is low density not to forget the environmental cost of increased mobility. And what we end up creating is a patch of little private nature for all of you. I advocate that our cities should be compact and dense so that we have a minimum footprint. There was a time when in India we were talking about the high-density, low rise development, and I feel we should re-visit that because high-density and low rise can lead to better social interaction as against high density and high rise.