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The endless city

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BOOK REVIEW

The endless city, edited by Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic, New York, Phaidon Press, 2007, 512 pp., (hbk), ISBN-10: 0714848204, ISBN-13: 978-0714848204

Global cities never sleep. This is the impression that remains after reading *The endless city*, an ambitious book about global cities edited by Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic in collaboration with the London School of Economics and Political Science and the Urban Age Project. The latter is a growing platform that brings together and facilitates meetings of scholars from various backgrounds and disciplines with policy-makers and practitioners. As one can read on their website (<http://www.urban-age.net>), it is the ambition of the Urban Age Project to set the agenda for global cities in what can now be considered as the urban age. The urban age, as the authors argue in the final chapter of the book, is not only a description but also a vision of what cities (can) do, how they grow, what they deliver and how they are organized.

The endless city shows once again that cities embody vitality, change, and growth. They are characterized by scale, speed, diversity of people and cultures, complexity, and connectivity. The dynamism that can be found in large cities is what has attracted people to them throughout history. Since the establishment of small, urban settlements near trade crossroads some 10,000 years ago, the city has expanded to encompass what we see today: a new urban age. The twenty-first century will be a time in which the majority of people all over the world will be living in cities. Today's cities are vital nodes in worldwide socio-economic networks, which is why Saskia Sassen introduced the term 'cityness' in 1991. The cities of today are not only interesting places to live, work, and recreate – they are the command and control centers of the global network and organizations in their own right.

That said, cities have their dark sides. Although *The endless city* gives an impression of optimism and hope, it also shows that urban space is vulnerable to crime and violence, radicalization of young people, and disasters of all kind from natural (e.g. flooding, one of the most frequent natural disasters), technical (e.g. failure of infrastructures) to the human-made (e.g. international terrorism). As they grow and expand, cities will develop and show their dark sides. Global cities, in this respect, reproduce patterns of disorder instead of order, fear instead of safety, and isolation instead of social mixing (United Nations 2007). The greatest concern for the contributors to this book therefore is [how] to organize *resilience* in the urban space.

In other words, the modern, global city is a vulnerable entity full of contradictions – an entity that has many faces. *The endless city*, as part of the Urban Age Project, has the ambition to contribute to the understanding of the urban landscape. The book, with 34 contributors from various backgrounds and disciplines, is roughly divided into two parts. The first part presents case studies of six global cities on different continents that are in a state of transition. The second part of the book looks at various issues and interventions.

The question implicitly raised in the first part of the book is how cities position themselves in a competitive, global environment. It is precisely economically defined competition that dominates the political debate on globalization: cities are global, financial powerhouses. The characteristics and distinctive features of these six cities are presented in separate chapters that can be read individually: New York, Shanghai, London, Mexico City, Johannesburg, and Berlin. Each has its own dynamic, but all want to attract the headquarters of multinationals, all want to become centers of global trade, organized production, tourism, and leisure industries. However, as interesting as the discussion of this competition is, the lesson that emerges is that global cities are (no longer) in competition with each other. The cities as they are presented form an integral part of the global city network. In her contribution to this book, Saskia Sassen once again argues: the global city is no isolated, stand alone phenomenon. Building upon her earlier work, she stresses that global cities are just nodes in global networks (Sassen 2002).

Another lesson is: there is no perfect city. Cities are complex places where organizations burdened with incomplete knowledge can together form a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. What becomes clear in this part of the book is that there is convergence and – if you like – institutionalization of ideas and policies on an abstract level. However, as Barbara Czarniawska (2002) convincingly showed in her work on the *glocalization* of city management, zooming into the local level reveals many examples of historically rooted characteristics that distinguish one city from another. In other words, the six cities vary greatly in density, styles, and networks. Through the six cases presented in *The endless city*, we learn a lot about issues such as globalization and local roots, immigration and autonomous growth, pollution and sustainability, and social inclusion and exclusion that characterize the urban age.

The first part of the book ends with a section that offers insights into the variety and local particularities of global cities. This section in particular is about data. To put it bluntly: numbers, pictures, and graphs flood the pages. The reader may have a hard time making sense of all the data because the authors are rather sparing in providing details of the methodology that formed the basis for gathering it. What remains after reading this part is the idea that *density* is key in categorizing and typifying global cities. All six cities can be characterized by increases in density of buildings, roads, inhabitants, and economic activities. However, the way density functions vary sharply across the cities. Path dependency – a consequence of choices made in the past – has led to variations in the way built environments shape the face of global cities.

The second part of the book offers a rich and sometimes enlightening variety of insights into the dynamics of global cities. Chapters on road building, community service, architecture (the world famous architect Rem Koolhaas has a chapter on authenticity), and informalities encourage the reader to dig in deeper into the complexity of the urban age. The authors invite the reader, so to speak, to jointly develop ideas for more sustainable and durable city development. About 20 innovative urban projects are discussed. The projects are selected for reflection and show small-scale, often bottom-up approaches that contribute to more sustainable urban conditions. For example, New York's Greenpoint Manufacturing and Designer Center is presented as an illustration of a neighborhood initiative that started as a small-scale not-for-profit industrial developer and has developed into a mature community-based industrial organization. It shows how small-scale initiatives and global industrial networks can come together. Equally important examples come from cultural renewals in Shanghai, street art in Mexico City, and post-apartheid city planning in Johannesburg.

The agenda for the urban age as proposed in final chapters of *The endless city* is interesting but nothing more than a first step in a crucial discussion: how to bring resilience into the urban space. The agenda must be about economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social inclusivity. The goal of the authors is to establish inclusive cities, which require multidimensional, integrated, and holistic interventions and policies. It is argued that ‘... if cities are to succeed, we must build a generation of generalists who see the connections between challenges and who work to devise and implement policies that advance multiple objectives simultaneously’ (479). This reinvention of the politics of the urban space and age requires vision and inclusive thinking.

Planning the urban space has always been a controversial topic – *The endless city* will not offer simple solutions or closure to the debate. The message, really, which comes from the book, is that the urban age is inevitable – it will be hard to control, but we have to understand its underlying dynamics in order to nurture its growth. Although total inclusion of all global cities’ dwellers is an illusion for obvious reasons, what we need is a Habermasian, democratic development in urban planning. *The endless city* shows that if urban planners want to contribute to a more sustainable urban age and to the quality of life in global cities, they have to reflect upon social issues, such as inequality, poverty, and diversity, more so than they do now. Urban areas contain the qualities and creativity to support processes of rebuilding and recovery. Therefore, when accepting the current situation of the growing interconnectedness inherent in the urban age, politicians, urban planners, and engineers have to incorporate these issues as the basis of their plans, organizational management, and city governance.

The endless city is a comprehensive, visually compelling book from a growing organization that is attempting to set the agenda for the future of the global age. After reading the book and looking at the many pictures of high-rises, one may be left with the conclusion that urban planning is still about megalomaniac visions and ideas. A closer look at the details of the book proves this conclusion to be wrong. Throughout the book, the authors of *The endless city* pay attention to the reckless and unbalanced growth of global cities. The dark side of city planning once unmasked by Jane Jacobs (1961) needs to be critiqued once more. Paying attention to diversity of all kinds and encouraging small-scale, subtle initiatives and interventions is crucial in the further development of cities in the urban age. Burdett and Sudjic did a great job bringing together authors that are aware of this urgency.

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