

Session 7 - Will tomorrow's cities still be human?

What will the city of tomorrow be like? The question that has intrigued generations of every epoch has led them to imagine their own particular utopias over the centuries. Given the issues raised by present-day cities, the subject is worth considering again, this time including the key changes of our century, first and foremost the digital tool heralding its revolution.

But how can we define the city?

A trading place, as it has always been, where primitive bartering has evolved into today's commerce.

A place for socialising, as it still is, despite social media. From the agora and Roman baths to the city square and today's cinemas, it hosts friends and enemies, perpetuating the spoken word.

A place of networks, as already with the Egyptians. Hieroglyphs tell the story, inscribing the crossing point of its routes within the circle of its walls.

A place of architecture, creating itself in the stone of its buildings. Buildings provide the form from which empty areas for public space can take shape.

A public place for hospitals, schools, courts and other institutions, making its monuments the places of the State.

A private place, providing for a link between public will and private work.

The multilinear urban phenomenon has undergone profound changes over the past century. In 1800, only one in thirty people lived in cities; now over half the world's population is concentrated within them, and this figure looks set to exceed two-thirds by 2050, according to the latest United Nations forecasts. There are now nearly fifty urban areas with over 10 million residents. Beyond the intrinsic questions raised by the city, the question of its scale now demands our full attention.

"The 19th century was a century of empires, the 20th century was a century of nation states. The 21st century will be a century of cities." The axiom of former Mayor of Denver, Wellington Webb, encapsulates the context of our discussion. At the dawn of the urban age, let's examine the potential of our cities.

Will tomorrow's cities be more ecological?

The disparity is flagrant. Although they only represent 2% of the Earth's surface, cities are responsible for 80% of greenhouse gas emissions, and consume 75% of global energy. Awareness of this led political leaders to create the C40 in 2005. This organisation now represents 80 of the world's largest cities, 600 million inhabitants and above all 70% of greenhouse gas emissions. The aim is clear: environmental transition starts in the city.

The arrival of digital tools heralds possibilities for transforming our energy resource management systems. The widespread use of check systems ensures the efficient transport of flows (water, gas and electricity) and, if need be, facilitates the diagnosis of breakdowns. But while logistics are affected, the production and consumption of resources are also changing. New advances in energy production, particularly renewable energy, are playing an ever-larger role in overall production. By developing individual solutions, new research promotes energy production as close as possible to where it is consumed. Meanwhile, digitally-controlled consumption systems limit wastage. On a global scale, digital tools facilitate energy management, meaning that production is more accurately tuned to requirements.

And our buildings are also being equipped, with the introduction of innovations in energy production, lighting, heating and ventilation, as well as access and security management.

Will tomorrow's cities facilitate their users' mobility?

The Taiheiyo Belt in Japan is a striking case. The megalopolis has developed from north to south over 1,200 km and has a population of 105 million. Meanwhile, people living in the Paris metropolitan area spend 70 minutes on average in transport travelling to work each day. In this sort of context, how can more efficient, less stressful mobility be ensured for users?

Beyond the conventional mobility networks (car, bus and metro), major changes are under way. The bicycle has resumed a leading role in daily transport; cities are developing cycle track networks and free bike services (available at terminals or in free-floating versions). Car-sharing networks have grown enormously over the last few years. With 63% of French people using private cars to get to work, sharing can considerably free up traffic and reduce damage to the environment.

Ever-more complex multimodal systems using new digital management interfaces are ensuring increasingly fluid journeys. Here again, the potential of digital technology makes it possible to adjust the mobility offer as closely as possible to users' requirements.

Will tomorrow's cities be the place for the future economy?

Tokyo's GDP is comparable to that of Canada; that of Paris is only just below South Africa's. With economic powers comparable to those of whole states, cities are now asserting themselves as crucial links in the world economy.

But the production of urban wealth has changed its nature. Small-scale businesses and a proportion of trade have left city centres. Industry has relocated to a huge extent. Work is shifting towards service activities, and inventing new ways of trading. Uberisation has now spread to a wide range of sectors: Deliveries (Deliveroo, Foodora, etc.), private transport (Uber, Blablacar, etc.), arts and crafts (Lulu dans ma rue, Hellocasa, etc.) – and tourism too (AirBnb). This latter activity is directly impacting city centres. Given the pressure on housing as well, former town centres are now emptying of residents, with living quarters being replaced by holiday rentals.

At the same time, the 21st century city is witnessing the emergence of a new form of entrepreneurship. Start-ups are revolutionising the economic landscape and influencing the structure of our cities. They are moving into new places, and through their work, are creating the tools that will shape the cities of tomorrow.

But what about the role of citizens in all this? How can tomorrow's city become the place of the digital age without forgetting the people who live there? How can the hopes of efficiency promised by the new technologies be nourished without jeopardising the private lives of individuals? Beyond the hopes and fears raised by the mass introduction of technologies to serve urban development, will tomorrow's cities lead to emancipation or slavery? London, Beijing, Toulouse, Berlin, Strasbourg, New York, Cannes, New Delhi and more – every city has its own particular features. While the issues they face are the same, can we imagine a single model for tomorrow's city?