CITIES: SAVING THE PLANET BY DESIGN

Keynote Address, World Cities Day Celebrations, Milan, Italy, 31 October 2015

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31 October 2015, World Cities Day. Are there reasons for celebration?

Let us say that we have a formidable challenge in front of us. By the year 2050, the world's population will count more than nine and a half billion people, roughly two and a half billion more than today.

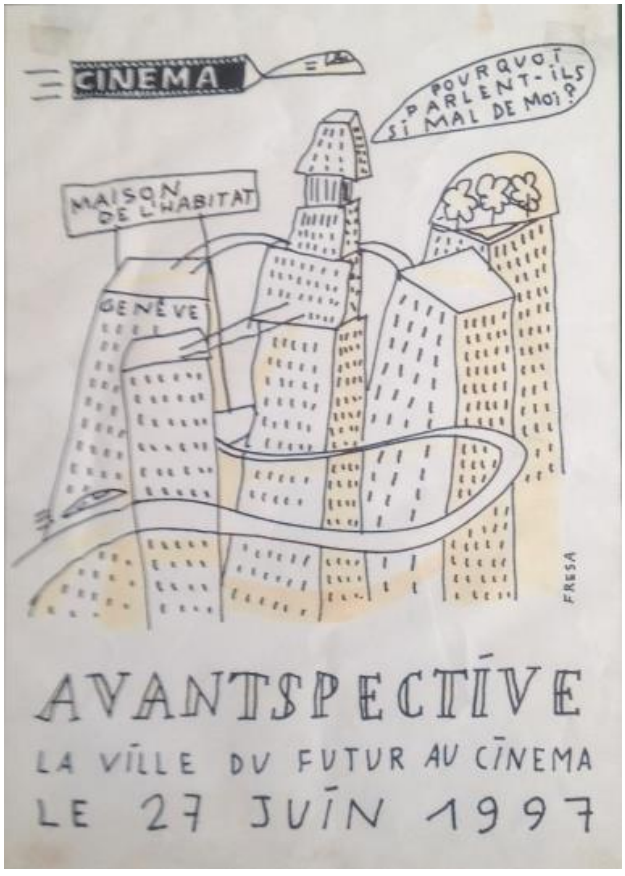
So, the challenge is to find a solution to accommodate 2.3 billion new passengers of spaceship earth between now and the turning point of the twenty-first century in a humane, intelligent and affordable way, and in a manner that is as respectful as possible of nature and of the planet's ecological balance.

This solution is the city.

The irony is the startling fact – one that is rarely mentioned because most urban observers do not bother to elaborate UN statistics and projections – that even more than these additional 2.3 billion - 2.4, in fact - will live in cities. (This discrepancy is due to the projected decrease of the population living in rural areas). In addition, 96.2 per cent of these new urban dwellers, more than 2.3 billion of them, will be living in the cities of the developing world. Yes: the near total of the world's population growth over the next 35 years will be concentrated in the cities of the countries least equipped to accommodate them. And most of the newcomers will be poor.

WORLD POPULATION, TOTAL, TOTAL URBAN, TOTAL URBAN IN DEVELOPING REGIONS, 2014-2050			
	2014	2050	increase
Total	7 243 784	9 550 944	2 307 160
Total urban	3 880 128	6 338 611	2 418 483
Total urban, developing regions	2 899 725	5 225 111	2 325 386
% urban developing regions over total urban			96,2
Author's elaborations based on projections from "World Urbanization Prospects – The 2014 Revision", Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations			

However, this scenario can become a solution if we manage, first of all, to leave behind us the urban platitudes the media have been hurling at us – that cities are inhuman, alienating, unhealthy, and the sources of every possible environmental crime.



"Pourquoi parlent-ils si mal de moi?" An event at UN-HABITAT's "Maison de l'Habitat", Geneva, 1997

Which cities, though? Certainly not Manhattan, which is the most ecological among all the cities of the entire United States of America. Which, in turn, are more "ecological" than the suburbs and the rural areas that surround them. In the case of Manhattan, this is so simply because it manages to satisfy the needs of millions of users with a very low per capita consumption of land and energy.

An aerial view of Manhattan

Similarly, we are habitual recipients of tales of horror by all media about the slums of third-world cities.

A Nairobi slum

Rarely, however, we reflect on the fact that the slum is a human settlement; and one that, paradoxically, achieves the same ecological result as the super-dense, super-compact world city – a very low consumption of land and energy per capita. Furthermore: squalid as they may be to the beholder, slums are the only urban sanctuaries for people with no means and in search of a better future.

Accra, Ghana

Accra, Ghana

Apart from these extremes, it is clear that sensibly planned cities are the human settlements that can provide the best social and economic opportunities with the minimum consumption of finite resources per capita, first among them land and energy. They do so because sensibly planned and designed cities are dynamic, compact and efficient.

The antithesis of the city is a settlement model –happily, only a theoretical one- based on the "equal distribution" of people on the planet. It is easy to imagine what this would mean: nearly all available land would be consumed by residential settlements, for the joy of those who cherish the dream of the individual and detached home; infrastructure costs would soar; energy uses would skyrocket; and the consumption of renewable resources would rapidly bring our planet way beyond what Aurelio Peccei, 40 years ago, described as "the limits to growth".

Rendering of "Dream Home"

So, cities can, indeed, save the planet.

But, of course, we must ask ourselves: "what kind" of cities? Anything but the "non-city": that is to say, the vast agglomerations sprawling around the consolidated urban fabric, whose only purpose is to produce and sell built space without any regard for the attributes of urban culture – proximity, contiguity, variety, discovery, beauty, contrast, surprise. In the non-city, the imperative of standardization produces repetitiveness and alienation. This alienation is dealt with by means of false antidotes that only end up reinforcing the "non-city" model: giant shopping centers that people can reach only by car and where they can perform the social role assigned to them – that of mass consumers. And paradoxically, technology is there to further consolidate the "non-city" model. Public spaces that facilitate true relationship, conviviality and civic expression – piazzas, corners, quiet streets, but also spaces where citizens can demonstrate and let their voices be heard - are replaced by their pathetic imitations in commercial outlets or by the individual use of those inappropriately called "social-networks" that Zygmunt Bauman denounces as indicators of an unwillingness to commit to responsible relationships.

However, the "non-city" has its virtuous alternative, and they both can be seen in almost every urban reality we know. Take Rio de Janeiro, for example. That city's newest

coastal development, “Barra da Tijuca”, is one example of how cities can renounce their vocation to save the planet: a wide highway separating residential from commercial functions; public transport inadequate to demand; an insufficient mix of residential options; gigantic residential towers stealing light and view from one another and sprayed

Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro, 2015

on the land without any order; every movement done by private automobile; the view and the way to the sea blocked for both residents and visitors. And compare this to Ipanema, a neighbourhood built not long

Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro, 2015

before, closer to the historic centre. There, planners achieved high density without sacrificing neither order nor the human scale. Ipanema’s physical layout is a simple orthogonal grid with all north-south streets leading to the free beach, ample sidewalks lined with trees, simple but pleasant architecture, everything reachable by foot and close to a subway stop; a pleasant mix of residential and commercial functions; and every street frontage lined with shops, cafes, and restaurants for all income levels of customers. Yes, Ipanema was planned and built for the middle and upper-middle class. But its planning principles are replicable at any scale and for any urban clientele, including the poorest. So, Ipanema embodies the solution I was advocating at the outset: how to host people in a humane, intelligent and affordable way, and in a manner that is as respectful as possible of nature and the planet’s ecological balance.

Of course, both Ipanema and Barra da Tijuca were “planned”. And this leads us to a last, central point. There is no doubt that cities and human settlements need to be planned. This applies both to high-income as well as to lower-income development, to urban

expansions as well as urban regeneration. However, there is good planning and bad planning. The Barra da Tijuka non-city was planned, too. Both settlements are "dense" and "compact". So, once we manage to convince ourselves that the dream of the detached individual home is wasteful and alienating, the challenge is to achieve density and compactness in a humane, intelligent and affordable way.

To think that this goal is beyond us, with the advances that knowledge, communication and technology have made, would be absurd. But this goal will not be reached by letting things go on their own. When we look at most of today's urban agglomerations from the air, we only wonder at how a human race that came up with airplanes that fly faster than the speed of sound, drugs that can cure and prevent virtually any major illness, and machines that work faster and more efficiently than the human brain, could produce cities that even at miles from the ground reveal themselves for what they are: giant, clumsy lost opportunities. So, we must convince ourselves that trend is not destiny. And most of all, we must educate ourselves to demand – demand, not simply wish for - equitably, sustainably, functionally, beautifully planned cities. Only this way will urbanists, architects, administrators, and enlightened entrepreneurs find the push and the moral resolve to give us what we all deserve and owe to the next generations – cities that will save the planet.