Confronting Power, Place and Change

Can cities in the information age create more equity in an unjust world?

by Brian English

The COVID pandemic has highlighted in sharp relief the structural inequalities and health disparities faced by people of color, the poor, immigrants and other marginalized communities. Similarly, the pandemic of racism itself, left undertreated for 400 years, wielded its own attacks on the right to breath. None of this should be a surprise, given the legacies of institutional racism, like "redlining" policies, that set in place the gaps in wealth and advantage.

In the information age, this grossly unequal access and treatment that different communities face, is being laid bare in no uncertain terms. The widespread and omnipresent integration of cameras and social media has become a new revolutionary sword, compelling millions of people out of their homes and into city streets to confront power, inequality and injustice.

We frequently hear the concept of "Smart Cities" discussed as a technology play, with focus on street lighting, parking and traffic controls, and such. But what other ways can cities and citizens leverage the inventions of the information age, including the Smart Cities movement, to create more just and equitable cities? And what are the perils that might exacerbate inequality?

Historically, cities themselves are widely considered one of the most important revolutions in human history[1]. Cities emerged hand in hand with the invention of writing some 5,500 years ago in Mesopotamia, marking the transition from prehistory to history, and what is called "the rise of civilization."[2] So it is noteworthy that our ever evolving information and communication technologies of the 21st century are now ushering in a new era of social mobilization, accountability and other checks and balances on the governing of our cities.

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1   This idea is captured by Gordon V. Chile's 1950 seminal paper The Urban Revolution
2   The Scope of Complex Artificial Environments, Juval Portugali

Cities are often where power hits the ground, where people and organizations go to gain and amass power. Saskia Sassen says cities have become today's frontier zones where those who are disadvantaged, discriminated or who lack power, can gain "presence vis-à-vis power and presence vis-à-vis each other." These moments of engagement in the body politic are essential encounters to change our relationships in society and the public sphere. These public encounters and amplified voices disrupt the narrative that "everything is fine" and change it by making "legible the local and silenced."[3]

TOOLS FOR RECONSTRUCTION, FROM THE BOTTOM UP

The best course of action to reduce inequality in our cities and nation would be to deconstruct institutional racism. We also need to construct new policies and programs as bold as the New Deal (but remember even this program had policies of exclusions) that can drive significant investments and reforms. After all, it was laws like the G.I. Bill and institutions like the Federal Housing Authority that established an unlevel playing field and set in place the gaps in accumulating wealth and education based on racial divides. While we cannot pretend that innovations of the information age are a substitute for larger reforms, they have proven themselves as powerful tools in social change. Therefore, we must leverage all the tools at our disposal to begin addressing matters now, from the grassroots up. Here are three opportunities for beginning this work now:

1. Get Practical and Tactical

We can begin modifying and improving procedures, recognition, and redistribution aspects of equity. The increased filming and distribution of police violence demonstrates the power of technology to create transparency and recognition of these injustices. But many other similar

tools can be used for restructuring the daily workings of our institutions, including from the grassroots up. For example, globally there has been tremendous innovations and uses of new affordable and distributed means of mapping, collecting data and sharing information. This has created procedural benefit of including communities previously left out, whether it's mapping the millions of informal, "lower-caste" communities in India or collecting pollution data by citizens regarding their burden of environmental injustice. These are powerful tools for advocating the recognition and redistribution of resources to address these community conditions.

2. Go Back to the Basics of "Who Decides?"

Cities must stay grounded in the fundamentals of planning and participation when they converge around questions like "who decides?", especially when pioneering smart cities. Since the time of Aristotle, cities, city-states and nations have debated who are citizens and what are their rights and responsibilities. Information and communications technology (ICT) and Smart Cities bring the potential to connect people with resources, information and services that empower them. As such, our focus should be on empowering marginalized communities to become the protagonists of their own development by knowing, exercising or gaining rights and power. This has bearing on all civil rights movements regarding gender, race, and even geography.[4]

If we lose sight of the fundamentals of planning, new forms of technocratic power could grow, dominate urban agendas and repeat legacies of top down policymaking and exclusion that we've seen in the past. In recent years, we have seen developers use the guise of the Smart Cities movement to try and create utopias, starting from scratch in satellite cities or in enclaves of the city. What we have learned is that the notion The first suburban developments of Levittown, are a hallmark of this planning approach that tries to

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3   THE CITY: TODAY'S FRONTIER ZONE, SASKIA SASSEN, Department of Sociology Columbia University, GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION 2014, 3, DOI: 10.12893/gjcpi.2014.3.1

4   See Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, written in 1969, a powerful framework for moving from tokenism to citizen control.

escape the complexities of urbanism and creating fantasies in a bubble. Ultimately, this approach can be a threat to democracy. History teaches us a lot about what happens when planners divide cities. Just look at Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, or Nicosia to see the folly of partitioning discordant communities. Rather than creating peace, it destroys the social contracts among residents.[5]

3. Don't lose sight of the goal

Rather than getting snarled by reinventing processes with new tech, we must measure our progress by improvements in equity *outcomes*.
ICT often provides a new way of executing an existing process. While this may constitute progress for "paper reduction acts", what we really need are improvements that address the outcomes we seek. Cities have been swimming with sales representatives from tech companies peddling their wares. If decisions to upgrade or implement new technologies lose site of the outcomes that we seek in our communities, they will lose their fidelity. That said, new ideas and innovations that have been injected into planning and governing systems should be welcomed as an opportunity to transform systems that are not working.

The 'Right to the City" movement, which dates back to the 1960s, questions the commodification of cities and the ability of capitalism to provide equitable access to all that a city offers. This movement has been reinvigorated by many social equity movements and has found recognition within the UN New Urban Agenda and even the City Statute of Brazil's federal law.

In the information age, where information is power, if it is confined by the lens of competition inherent in capitalism, there is a risk to the democratization of information. Viewed through that lens, ICT risks becoming another arm of capitalism that grabs power and excludes those who can't pay. In today's world, we cannot let the business of Smart Cities crowd out innovations and innovators with equity solutions. Social enterprises and B-Corps, "missions with a business," can help with this, serving as collaborative partners for good.

In the end, we must remember that we are not simply planning cities for the information age; we are in the information age planning cities.

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5   Eugenie Birch, Cities, People and Processes as Planning Case Studies (2012), in Oxford Handbook of Urban Planning: Chapter 14, Publisher: Oxford, Editors: Rachel Webber and Randall Crane, pp.259-282

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