Inventing future cities

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BOOK REVIEW

Inventing future cities, by Michael Batty, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2018

In 2019, the unthinkable occurred in New York City. The tantalizing promise of Amazon bringing tens of thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue was tossed into the East River, next to the Long Island City site where new headquarters were supposed to go. Local residents took a "not in my backyard" stance despite a signed agreement on the state level. Hundreds of American cities had vied for the privilege of hosting the billion dollar company, leaving many New Yorkers scratching their heads. What city could turn away such an opportunity?

That one cannot predict what will happen in cities is the central premise of Michael Batty's intriguing new book, *Inventing Future Cities*. A heavily theoretical work, Batty incorporates key historical elements into his arguments regarding how and why we should figure out the future. The book is provocative and puzzling at the same time, especially for an historian such as this reviewer. We should admire Batty for taking on the impossible task of trying to understand what the next century will bring, and for his ambition in taking into account factors that are often difficult to grasp in the global context he employs.

The book evokes a strong set of memories of 1960s and 1970s urban studies: conurbation, megalopolis, ecumenopolis, the organic city, quantitative charts and maps, and some little-known urban theorists. Yet the book avoids a retro feel by diving into technology and the complex interaction of the global workspace. The author incorporates influential figures such as Patrick Geddes and Jane Jacobs to help us understand pathways to the future city.

Specificity in predicting the future might be nearly impossible, but the book asserts that the future will include *only* cities as the basic geospatial entity all people will live in. Batty predicts that by 2019 most of the earth will be urban, all divisions between city and country blurred, and distances contracted by technological tools. "The great transition taking place will change the concept of the city as a physical and perhaps even a spatial entity quite radically," Batty asserts (p. 12).

That the city was forever changed by the Industrial Revolution, arguably the first and most profound technology revolution ever, Batty says in Chapter 1, is widely accepted by urbanists. That new industrial city stimulated an enormous intellectual response by people who envisioned ideal and planned places that functioned far more efficiently than the pre-industrial city. Any student during the heyday of urban studies was captivated by the abundance of the new town planning programs, promising perfectly whirring centers of commerce and residence, along with modernized forms of transportation. Yet many of those inspired urban planners got it wrong, as evidenced by the Club of Rome and Henry von Foerster's Doomsday equation predicting population growth, Batty says in Chapter 2.

The impossibility of prediction is reflected perfectly in the fact that the largest cities in the 21st century are ones that 50 years ago barely existed—mostly Asian, with the exception of Cairo, Egypt. In the same way Karl Marx wrongly predicted that the Communist Revolution would start in Germany, few people thought that once third-world areas would in a period of a few decades be converted into giant skyscraper entities. In 2015, Batty says, Guangzhou was the world's largest city with 46 million in a world population of 3.82 billion; the top five cities contained 4.75% of the world's population, an eye-opening fact. As Constantinos Doxiades, the talented but under-recognized urban planner, said in 1976, it is inevitable that everyone will live in cities.

That certainly speaks to Batty's point in chapters 3 and 8 that cities are not just spatial entities, but places that "generate innovations that drive citizens forward" (p. 42). Citing Ed Glaeser's *Triumph of the City*, he emphasizes the critical role of diversity in making those innovations happen. Yet one wonders how diversity can succeed in these incredibly large communities. Technology is the obvious answer, but Batty, like Lewis Mumford, is nervous about the scope and reach of technology in affecting human relations. As studies show, one cannot have 300 or 400 Facebook "friends" but

rather a couple of dozen; Batty cites one study that shows 150 is a limit for stable relationships, but for social networks the average is "six links from any person anywhere to any other" (p. 44). Perhaps this is why neighborhoods, with their promise of more personal relations, are once again on the rise as social centers.

Batty cites the three essential characteristics of cities as had been outlined in 1985 by Kenneth T. Jackson in his seminal work *Crabgrass Frontier*: density, interaction, and geospatial proximity/contiguity. All this had been established much earlier, in the brilliant reformulation of cities by the Greeks in the 6th and 5th centuries, and later by the Romans in the 3rd and 2nd centuries. In chapters 4 and 6, Batty summarizes the known history of physical form while questioning the flaws of the modern context, mostly technology. Building skyward is a relatively new development, mostly 20th century, but a critical one in adding density. At the same time, horizontal expansion resulted in urban sprawl in places like London and Amsterdam, the book argues. The final result of population increase in changing the landscape was suburbanization, which has been the subject of many useful studies.

One critical issue is the economic consequence of all this. Without too many specifics, the author notes the classic model of distribution with the poorest crammed into the center and then the wealthy moving away from it. That model meant that increased crime and morbidity accompanied the condensed nature of poverty. Yet we know some cities such as New York, San Francisco, and London that do not follow this pattern.

Still, cities reflect the complexity of humans. Their behavior changes: for example, they walk faster in cities, Batty reminds us. He discusses ways to chart human activity in a world where there are 3.5 billion Google searches a day and 200 billion emails a day. In Chapter 5, he suggests that the way to utilize all this big data would be through a sensor system that measures social, physical, and routine activities. While this approach has its benefits—knowing when the next bus is coming, for example—it also has its skeptics, who wonder exactly how useful that processed mass of information can actually be. The implications of technology receive further examination in Chapter 7.

Humans may create cities, Batty reminds us, but they also bear the toll of their problems. Fixing broken and decayed cities is not simple, demanding a self-conscious process by their inhabitants to figure out solutions. In London, the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017 elicited a fierce response from both public and government; yet the unpopularity of tall residential buildings in that country had been known for a long time. The opposite is true in New York, where tall and expensive residence buildings have sprouted in formerly low-rise Brooklyn and Queens. In Manhattan, the Woolworth Building, landmark of American commerce and the nation's tallest for a long time, is being converted to contain 40% residences.

Inventing Future Cities is provocative in raising as many questions about the future as in answering them. Where will our food come from? Will once-defunct epidemic disease return, as was the case in 2019 with measles? Will increasingly fractious politics create economic chaos in cities? Can extremes of wealth and poverty be controlled in urban settings? There is a lot to ponder.

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