Cities are the way of the future. Can we make them better for everyone?

HOW’S THIS FOR A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE: Only 13 percent of people were urban dwellers at the dawn of the 20th century, but by 2050, 70 percent of the global population will reside in cities. In 1970, the world had two “megacities”—New York and Tokyo—with populations over 10 million, while today there are 23; by 2025, there are expected to be 37. The world’s anticipated population growth in the next few decades, from 7 billion now to around 9 billion in 2050, will take place largely in cities throughout the developing world. Because the vast majority of humanity will soon be urban, the quality of life in our cities is becoming more critical than ever.
Some governments are rushing to harness the benefits of modernity and economic gains. In Mexico City, for example, the city government has transformed in just three decades to become an international industrial behemoth, and in Asian countries, the positioning of cities as centers of global trade, financial services, and tourism is a priority. In recent years, the city of Lagos, Nigeria, the rough-and-tumble commercial and industrial hub of Lagos has by some estimates seen its population double over the past decade and a half to 21 million people, and in India, the city of Mumbai has grown to over 18 million people. These cities are developing at a dizzying rate.

The massive strains upon these cities often trigger doomsday sce- narios of scarce food, dwindling water, insufficient sanitation, overcrowding, pollution, and strife, which are all valid fears. But in every corner of the globe, the rise of the city is also being viewed as a moment of enormous promise, an opportunity to actually spread the blessings of mo- dernity while ushering in an era of sustainable, smart growth. At this critical juncture, scholars across disciplines at NYU are at the forefront of deter- mining what makes cities succeed and how they can be equipped to flourish far into the future.

And there’s no better place to start than at home, in New York City. 

Although New York was the epicenter of the financial crash, even I’ve been surprised by how well it’s ‘boomed’ says Richard Florida, a world-renowned voice on cities and an urbanist. “The diversity of its economy, its people, and its culture means that it can come out in better shape than it was.”

The author of The Rise of the Creative Class (Basic Books) and co-founder of the Urbanization Project, Florida was appointed Global Research Professor at the School of Professional Studies in 2012, and he and his collaborators are also scrutinizing the city’s growing class divide and analyzing how to reverse it.

Florida says, “It’s about making sure the benefits of the knowl- edge-based creative and tech economies are extended to include a much broader segment, especially those who work in the low-wage service econ- omy, ‘he and his collaborators are also scrutinizing the city’s growing class divide and analyzing how to reverse it.”

One of the project’s initiatives, Urban Expansion, is an idea cultivated by John Falcocchio, a veteran professor of transportation planning and engineering at NYU-Poly, found himself among a small cadre of experts making the case for the potential benefits of congestion pricing—a policy that would otherwise clog side streets.

The other prong of the Urbanization Project is an idea cultivated by Romer to create what are essentially start-up cities on vacant land in de- veloping countries. These so-called “charter cities” would be guided by prin- ciples of reform that allow a country to use a new city to experiment with approaches to improving economic and social life. The idea has not been without critics. Some question the ability of governments to govern such cities, and others argue that these cities would not succeed without the aid of international assistance.

The success of even an apparently low-tech strategy like congestion pricing in New York, Falcocchio says, “will depend on a combination of public awareness, visibility and enforcement, and on whether or not the public understands the consequences of not paying the toll.”

The other prong of the Urbanization Project is an idea cultivated by Romer to create what are essentially start-up cities on vacant land in de- veloping countries. These so-called “charter cities” would be guided by prin- ciples of reform that allow a country to use a new city to experiment with approaches to improving economic and social life. The idea has not been without critics. Some question the ability of governments to govern such cities, and others argue that these cities would not succeed without the aid of international assistance.

The success of even an apparently low-tech strategy like congestion pricing in New York, Falcocchio says, “will depend on a combination of public awareness, visibility and enforcement, and on whether or not the public understands the consequences of not paying the toll.”

The other prong of the Urbanization Project is an idea cultivated by Romer to create what are essentially start-up cities on vacant land in de- veloping countries. These so-called “charter cities” would be guided by prin- ciples of reform that allow a country to use a new city to experiment with approaches to improving economic and social life. The idea has not been without critics. Some question the ability of governments to govern such cities, and others argue that these cities would not succeed without the aid of international assistance.

The success of even an apparently low-tech strategy like congestion pricing in New York, Falcocchio says, “will depend on a combination of public awareness, visibility and enforcement, and on whether or not the public understands the consequences of not paying the toll.”

The other prong of the Urbanization Project is an idea cultivated by Romer to create what are essentially start-up cities on vacant land in de- veloping countries. These so-called “charter cities” would be guided by prin- ciples of reform that allow a country to use a new city to experiment with approaches to improving economic and social life. The idea has not been without critics. Some question the ability of governments to govern such cities, and others argue that these cities would not succeed without the aid of international assistance.

The success of even an apparently low-tech strategy like congestion pricing in New York, Falcocchio says, “will depend on a combination of public awareness, visibility and enforcement, and on whether or not the public understands the consequences of not paying the toll.”

The other prong of the Urbanization Project is an idea cultivated by Romer to create what are essentially start-up cities on vacant land in de- velop-
Collecting this data from the various companies and agencies that own it and putting it to work in urban planning is an “immense amount of work” for computer scientists and transportation officials alike, Silva says. Another obstacle is a very real concern about privacy. When it comes to data about people’s whereabouts, it will take time to reach consensus about what “should be available and what should not be available” in the meantime, as computer scientists work to develop reliable methods for “anonymizing data, they rely upon volunteers who donate their personal information for research.

Nobody actually wants to own data about particular people moving around. You could tell the city officials where your car is just as well as where you are. But it’s hard to imagine who would want that information for the future would know “where you are” without needing to know “who you are.”

—Eilisn Reynolds

The developing world cities, Thurston says, “are now facing what New York City faced 50 to 100 years ago with respect to air and water pollution. And with its waterways and air cleaner than they have been in ages, New York may serve as an example that ‘these can be achieved at the same time that economic growth occurs. We are a species good at adapting things.’” Thurston says, “But knowledge, in this case, is power.”

Awareness is crucial to keeping our cities clean, too, says Robin Nagle, chief associate professor and director of NYU’s John W. Draper Program. With each American generating, on average, between 45 and 8 pounds of garbage a day, personal responsibility represents the start of great strides. Yet, as Nagle says, “Even if I lived a zero-waste life and didn’t generate discards of any kind,” she says, “I still have to try my best in the seafood by using an eyedropper.”

With that in mind, Nagle implores the public to acknowledge the valuable work of the people who help keep our cities clean, which she explores in her book, Picking Up. On the Streets and Behind the Trucks With the Sanitation Workers of New York City (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). “As we think about how to change the system, we have to think about the labor and the people who will do it,” she says.

The goal is to make those loads lighter, for everyone’s sake. Recycle-able plastics, electronics, and automobile parts are just some of the products that cities need to pressure manufacturers to consider. It’s cities that can bring market pressure to bear, argues Nagle, who also speaks of “reusing” or “repairing” centers for items that, formerly, would have been “discarded.”

City-wide composting is also part of her vision of an environmental “utopia”—a utopian fantasy that’s turning real since Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced an ambitious plan in June to start collecting food scraps across the five boroughs. Even better, the so-called curbside program has shown an unexpectedly high level of participation. “If we have the political will,” she says, “we could recalibrate the whole system.”

—Roy Hoffman

Information, operations, and management sciences at the Leonard N. Stern School of Business, whose research interests include peer economies and the digital technologies that shape them. The fraction of people who are going to call themselves freelancers, or who will be doing what we traditionally would have called freelancing, has been exploding rapidly,” he says, thanks in part to online marketplaces, such as the arts-and-crafts hub Etsy and TaskRabbit, a virtual staffing agency of more than 11,000 carefully vetted would-be personal assistants for hire for individual projects, including dog-walking and furniture assembly.

Income needs to stop at odd jobs, either. With Avoli, you can turn your
Recently ruled Airbnb does not violate NYC’s hotel law. “It will be a painful pro-

ably remain most valuable to part-time workers looking to supple-

nters to Google’s Mountain View, California, campus each day. “People want to

nuclear family exemplified by George, John Bringardner

son notes. Even prosperous cities—such as Seattle and San Francisco—are

vency has kept African-Americans isolated in the most disad-

in those societies are doubling every two to three

Housing Act in 1968, at the height of the civil rights era.

on notes. Even prosperous cities—such as Seattle and San Francisco—are

But will virtual marketplaces, ever-growing commutes, and technolo-

The nuclear family exemplified by George, John Bringardner


to people, “he says—and that’s not likely to change.

is no secret that cities generate wealth and opportunity. As Patrick Lamson-Lawson, a research scholar at NYU Stein’s Urbanization Project, puts it, “Nobody really gets poorer when a society is urbanized!” Building a new city is a tremendous economic project, with jobs and whole industries created to support the construction of essentials such as roads and housing. And compared to their rural counterparts, city dwellers enjoy greater access to health care and education, significantly higher incomes, and ever-longer life expectancies. But what can happen, when governments and city officials fail to invest that newfound wealth in the future, Lamson-Lawson (WAG ’13) cautions, is that the poor get poorer relative to the rich. “Urbanization is a great force for improving lives,” he says. “But it doesn’t do that equally across the board.”

The poorest workers in China’s most rapidly urbanizing areas are currently saving their incomes double every two to three years. That’s an impressive result, until you consider that for the highest earners in those societies are doubling every two to three months. And in cities with breakneck population growth such as Mumbai and Lagos, residents packed into informal settlements with no access to water, sewer, or ambulance services contend with pollution caused by the unceasing snarl of traffic. Proximities are also made to provide basic infrastructure to an area that wasn’t planned is nine times higher than the cost of providing it to an area that was, a city that fails to spend at the start risks creating isolated urban pockets separate from the rest of the world.

But you don’t have to look to the developing world to find such pockets, NYU sociologist Patrick Sharkey argues. The author of Stick in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress Toward Racial Equality (University of Chicago Press), he has studied the informal strategies and institutional mechanisms that have kept African-Americans isolated in the most disadvantaged parts of America’s cities, decades after the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, at the height of the civil rights era. His findings are startling: “The families we see in very disadvantaged neighborhoods are the same ones we’ve seen over multiple generations,” Sharkey explains. He calculates that 73 percent of African-American adults living in the poorest, most segregated urban neighborhoods were raised by parents who grew up in similar neighborhoods a generation earlier. If the patterns do not change, the same families who live in the ghettos in 2050 will still be there in 2070.

“It’s the cumulative exposure to neighborhoods with low-quality institutions, high stressors, fewer public spaces, and more pollution that seems to have substantial consequences on kids’ developmental trajectories,” Sharkey says. Breaking the cycle will require what he calls a “durable policy of investment” in neighborhoods that have suffered decades of governmental neglect—an effort that would involve federal efforts to end exodization zoning, expand affordable public housing, and strengthen connections between police and community groups.

It’s an investment worth making, as true integration—with people of all races and income levels living together in close quarters—is the essential democratic promise of urban life. “When we’re in close contact with each other,” Lamson-Lawson says, “there’s more turmoil, more churn, and people are more aware of inequality and of the possibilities of what life could be like.”