Guest editorial: Volume 4, Issue 2, 2013

‘Urban challenges’ continued: More challenges ahead

Kayvan Karimi
The Bartlett School of Graduate Studies
University College London (UCL)

Pages: v-vi
About a year ago, the editorial team of JOSS decided to publish a special issue of the journal on ‘urban challenges’, as a response to the relentless necessity of addressing the contests of contemporary urbanism. That issue, published in August 2013, included papers dealing with issues such as intensive global urbanisation, the stigmas of technocratic planning, suburban spatial transformations and the impacts of regulations and legislations on the urban form. These were complemented by a set of Forum pieces which examined the city of Beirut through the prisms of planning, spatial structure and social challenges. However, the response to the call for papers was so overwhelming that we lacked the space to publish more papers meriting publication. This was the main reason behind the decision to extend the special issue and produce a sequel: ‘Urban challenges II’.

In the thematic part of this issue we have four papers and one Forum piece. The papers present a range of issues that have different theoretical, methodological and scalar approaches, covering issues such as emerging new urbanism, tackling large city-region systems, post-socialist new towns and transforming peri-urban centres. The single Forum piece of this issue is a rather expressive narrative of the Beirut research depicted in the previous issue.

In the first paper of this issue (‘The real new urbanism: Engaging developing world cities’, p.167-178), Gabriel Fuentes presents his theoretical proposition to rethink the normative practices of contemporary urban and architectural design. In his view the emerging urbanisms of the developing world, created under the influence of rapid growth and increasing urban poverty, cannot simply follow the patterns that have been generated by Western, developed urbanism. Regardless of the rights and wrongs of modern urban planning in the West, the developing world is in need of redeveloping critical practices which are capable of understanding these urbanities at multiple scales. Such practices, Fuentes argues, require a critically open approach which is capable of responding to physical and non-physical forces, within the context of systemic relations of the city. The new forms of urban ecological thinking and practice, in Fuentes’ view, must engage with vast and complex opportunities, ranging from bottom-up grass root activism, educational agendas, informal economies and local politics to top-down political, economic, and environmental policies.

While the main concern of the second paper of this issue is also very large urban systems, it deals with an entirely different urban challenge. The main question of Miguel Serra and Paulo Pinho’s paper (‘Tackling the structure of very large spatial systems - Space syntax and the analysis of metropolitan form’, p.179-196) is that of developing analytical methods for understanding the city-region morphologies. Serra and Pinho argue that the morphologies of contemporary city-regions are much more complex than simple scaled up versions of traditional cities, due to the vast diversities created by a huge variety of land-uses, topographical features, dispersal of physical or human densities, decentralisation of activities and administrative boundaries. The paper investigates, through a space syntax model of Oporto’s metropolitan region, how a very large urban system could be reduced to its constituent parts in an efficient way, revealing that spatial centrality is in fact a continuous property that occurs at all scales of the city-region, from the most local to the most global level. By employing the methods of principal component analysis (PCA) to reduce the dimensionality of the system, the research discovers that the morphological variations of spatial centrality can be identified predominantly by only three basic modes, identified as those of the region, the city and...
the neighbourhood. By reducing an infinite number of centralities to three distinct and manageable scales, which represent the whole local-to-global spectrum of centralities, the paper consolidates the application of space syntax analysis in tackling metropolitan and regional challenges.

In her paper (‘The urban transformations of post-socialist Dunaújváros’, p.197-220), Christina Lenart takes us to a different part of the world to examine the impact of modern city building ideas on older settlements that have evolved under entirely different socio-economic circumstances. The research investigates how Dunaújváros, a Hungarian city which was planned as an ideal socialist industrial town, evolved in parallel to the development of an old village next to it. Through a series of analyses, using space syntax methods, the paper shows how the old village, Óváro, has surrendered its significance as a centre, to an artificially created centre, constructed as an example of planned idealism. This phenomenon is apparent in many other countries and is not unique to so-called socialist cities. The study also shows that Dunaújváros deviates from other post-socialist cities by developing a more mixed-used town centre and creating communities not only through the ritual use of public space, but also by everyday human activities. The paper argues that to truly understand the character of cities such as Dunaújváros, it becomes important to use analytical methods that enable us to observe their developments over a longer span of time. It concludes that this type of research can enhance the understanding of development criteria and a more efficient, evidence-based approach to planning for post-socialist cities and its centres in general.

In the final paper of this issue (‘Beyond the suburban high street cliché - A study of adaptation to change in London’s street network: 1880-2013’, p.221-241), Laura Vaughan and her co-authors focus on the urban challenge of understanding peri-urban transformations and changing role of their centres, ‘high streets’. The research uses digitised historical maps, land-use data and space syntax analysis to identify the changing network structure of two outer suburban areas of Greater London, Surbiton and South Norwood. The paper shows that the idiosyncrasies of these peri-urban areas and their spatial evolution are crucial to understanding their socio-spatial functioning over time. The authors argue that a complex process of scalar adaptability contributes to the resilience of the high street, through the different stages of urban transformation generated by social and technological change. A key proposition of the paper is that a distinguishing feature of the traditional high street is not simply ‘mixed uses’ but is rather ‘mixing uses’ that are embedded in their contextual spatial structure and which enable the highest level of adaptability in different historical periods. This is, in their view, a balance of change and continuity realised in the spatial morphology of the suburban high street, which makes the highest contribution to the resilience of peri-urban centres.

The four papers and the Forum piece presented in this special issue of JOSS, together with the pieces which have been published in the previous issue, present a large volume of research and exploration in the field, but it seems that the more we scratch the surface of the inherent and emerging challenges in our urban world, the more is revealed. This is certainly not going to end here, and the challenge will only grow further and greater. However, as researchers and practitioners, we have no choice but to scratch harder and dig deeper. This is not a task that can be accomplished by one single discipline or one stream of research. What is needed is a collective effort to tackle the most important challenge of the 21st Century: Urbanism.

Kayvan Karimi
Guest Editor