Redeveloping Our Cities for the Future

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When I was a scholar at Cambridge University in the 1990s, my now-departed colleague and friend Wynne Godley would drop by on Sundays to take me to visit one of the ubiquitous medieval churches in the villages of East Anglia. Wynne frequently noted that "a church is more a process than a building. It unfolds over centuries and involves generations of families in its construction and maintenance." He had a keen eye for architectural detail and would point out a buttress or belfry that illustrated distinct technical practices, unusual materials, or both. A single church offered a living, layered record of how successive generations of a community solved the challenge of making and keeping large, enclosed, open spaces for worship feasible and beautiful.

In this way, cities are much like medieval churches. Over time, they illustrate the collaboration of generations of residents, as well as the evolution of economic, technical, and even social tools used to build and maintain them. Rome's marble relics stand testament to ancient values, aesthetics, and building ingenuity, while a modern city thrives around them. Manhattan's iconic skyline, seemingly fixed, is ever in flux, and is now evolving dramatically to respond to 21st-century demands for sustainability, resilience, mixed-use development, and other concerns.

The boundaries of cities evolve, too, and tell another critically important story. The future of the planet may depend on our capacity to understand that story and to develop the tools and collective will to manage the pattern and progression of urban growth. Shlomo (Solly) Angel documents this trajectory in the *Atlas of Urban Expansion* (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2012), which uses satellite images collected over decades to track the spatial evolution of 120 cities around the world, from Bamako and Guadalajara to Shanghai and Milan. The last half-century of urban growth has provided a cautionary tale about the seduction of sprawl—a path of least resistance that generates quick profits but unsustainable development. Our ability to manage our ecological footprint and minimize our global impact will be tied inextricably to our ability to plan and construct more dense and efficient human settlements. Given the United Nations' prediction that the global urban population will nearly double to 6 billion by 2050, the fortunes of the planet will depend on whether we, as a species, adopt a more appropriate development paradigm over this half-century.

As we endeavor to reinvent our urban settlements, we will confront an old foe—land that is already improved and developed, but needs to be adapted to new uses. While we are not unfamiliar with this highly contentious process, it is safe to say that we have not yet cracked the code on how to manage it. This issue of *Land Lines* considers some of the driving needs that will require creative approaches to redevelopment in different cities and contexts: satisfying the unmet demand for housing that leads millions of workers in Beijing to subterranean habitation; financing infrastructure to manage population pressure in Rio and other Brazilian cities; or repurposing land in the throes of a complete industrial, demographic, and fiscal overhaul in Detroit. These places are quite distinct, but all will face similar challenges as they evolve in the coming decades.

At the Lincoln Institute, we are keenly aware of the need for new ideas and new practices to facilitate sustainable redevelopment of land that is already developed or occupied. Over the next year, we will begin to build an intellectual enterprise around addressing the manifold challenges of urban regeneration—extracting the lessons learned from earlier efforts in the United States and other developed countries since World War II, finding new and creative ways to finance infrastructure that improves the land under the informal settlements that choke cities in developing countries, or rekindling the fiscal health of legacy cities like Detroit by unpacking the causes of insolvency and testing remedies for it.

The medieval churches that I visited during the 1990s offered lessons in stone. These included innovative techniques and materials that permitted medieval architects to defy gravity. Perhaps more importantly, they were monuments to the communal efforts and long-term commitment of the congregations that built and sustained them over centuries. In the end, human survival might hinge on our ability to override similarly the centripetal forces that undermine collective action, and to build and maintain the social structures and policy frameworks to develop and redevelop our cities for mutual and long-term posterity. LL