

# City Planet

Cities generate wealth and shrink population.  
As billions move from the country to the cities in the developing world, at a rate  
unprecedented in history, the nature of the world economy is shifting.

**by Stewart Brand**

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*“In the village, all there is for a woman is to obey her husband and family elder, pound grain, and sing. If she moves to town, she can get a job, start a business, and get education for her children.”*

I heard this remark, made by a global community activist, in 2000 at a *Fortune Magazine* conference in Aspen, Colorado. It was enough to explode my Gandhi-esque romantic notions about the superiority of village life.

Ever since, I’ve been asking travelers back from remote places what they noticed out in the countryside. Their universal report: The world’s villages are emptying out, everywhere. People are moving to cities far more rapidly than most of us realize.

Increasing urbanization is accelerating the economic development of the world with remarkable speed. The consequences are going to be profound, particularly for the institutions that serve people — government agencies, corporations, and the creators of infrastructure. Remarkably few people have noticed the change, and few among civic and corporate leaders are prepared to deal with it.

### **Younger Cities, Older People**

One reason for this lack of preparation is the fact that the growth of cities has led to demographic trends exactly the opposite of what many experts predicted. Only 15 years ago, it was widely assumed that human population would continue to increase exponentially, as it had since the Industrial Revolution. In 1972, at the influential U.N. Conference on the Human Environment, two of the world’s most prominent environmentalists conducted a fierce debate about population. One was Stanford University biology professor (and my old teacher) Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb*; the other was Barry Commoner, author of *The Closing Circle*. Professor Ehrlich declared that the “bomb” could be defused only by stringent government action, and Mr. Commoner insisted that the “demographic transition” to a stable population would come naturally with the eradication of poverty. Both were wrong. Neither foresaw the dominant effect that urbanization would have.

But it was obvious by the beginning of the 21st century. “Some 59 countries, comprising roughly 44 percent of the world’s total population, are currently not producing enough children to avoid population decline,” wrote journalist Phillip Longman in *Foreign Affairs* in 2004. “The phenomenon continues to spread. By 2045, accordingly to the latest U.N. projections, the world’s fertility rate as a whole will have fallen below replacement levels.” In the article (titled “The Global Baby Bust”) and in his subsequent book *The Empty Cradle*, Mr. Longman went on to explain the cause: “As more and more of the world’s population moves to urban areas in which children offer little or no economic reward to their parents, and as women acquire economic opportunities and reproductive control, the social and financial costs of childbearing continue to rise.” After I absorbed these ideas, my lifelong worries about population growth, instead of disappearing, reversed. Now I have to worry about the disruptions of *depopulation*.

Demographically, the next 50 years are likely to be the most wrenching in human history. Massive numbers of people are making massive changes. Having just experienced the first doubling of world population in a single lifetime (from 3.3 billion in 1962 to 6.5 billion now), we now are discovering it is the last doubling. Birthrates worldwide are dropping not only much faster than expected, but much further. It used to be assumed that birthrates would get down to the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman and level off, but in most places the birthrates continue to decelerate with no bottom in sight. Meanwhile the “population momentum” of the already born and their children will carry world population to a peak of 7.5 to 9 billion around 2050 and then head downward.

Even those who note the trend correctly tend to think of it as a developed-world phenomenon: “aging Japan” and “senescent Europe.” Indeed, the long-urbanized developed nations have an average birthrate of 1.56 children per woman, and in some places the rate is as low as 1.3. Those are radical depopulation numbers. It is already in the cards that Russia, Japan, Italy, Spain, and Germany will have fewer people in 2050 than they do now. And by then the majority will be old, past childbearing. Just as the population exploded upward exponentially when the birthrate was above 2.1, it accelerates downward exponentially when it’s below 2.1. Compound interest cuts both ways. Fewer children make fewer children.

But the main event of the demographic circus is in the cities of the developing world — and most of it in squatter cities, the teeming slums of the uninvited. A billion people live in squatter cities now. Two billion *more* are expected by 2050. Squatters are nearly one-sixth of all humans now, one-fourth to one-third pretty soon.

Already, as a result of the headlong urbanization, birthrates have plummeted in the developing world from 6 children per woman in the 1970s to 2.9 now. Twenty “less developed” countries, including China, Chile, Thailand, and Iran, have already dropped below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman.

And what about the young and fertile couples in developing countries? If current demographic trends continue, two billion of them will live in the cities, voting with their ovaries for fewer children. It’s not because they’re poor. They were poor in the countryside. In town they see opportunity to come up in the world. Having fewer children, who are better educated, is part of that equation

The long-anticipated “demographic transition” is happening now, sooner and more rapidly than expected, and it’s a world-changer. The cities of the developing world will see dramatic population increases over the next 30 years, quickly followed by an equally dramatic maturing of their population. No one knows what, if anything, will forestall the depopulation trend in this century, but then no one predicted that the population explosion would be leveled off mainly by people moving to cities.

Meanwhile, this overwhelming demographic shift is only one of the changes in store from the new cities of this century. As cities always do, they will foster new forms of culture and technology, and they will lead to often surprising shifts in business and trade patterns. The proposed solutions to most of the problems of the world — and the problems of individual enterprises — will either take hold or wither depending on their success or failure in cities.

## **Urban Legions**

Every week 1.3 million new people arrive in the world’s cities (about 70 million a year). It is the largest movement of humanity in history, one that started at least 100 years ago and is still accelerating. Signs are that the flood will continue for decades.

Three percent of humanity was urban in 1800, 14 percent in 1900. Sometime in 2006 or 2007 the proportion of urban dwellers will pass 50 percent worldwide, which may represent an economic tipping point. United Nations projections put the world’s city dwellers at 61 percent in 2030, continuing upward to an expected equilibrium around 80 percent. The transition point from a “developing” to a “developed” country seems to occur when the country becomes 50 percent urban. (Most developed nations arrived at that point and their present state of about 75 percent urbanization much more gradually than the developing nations currently undergoing breakneck growth in cities.) In that light, Earth as a whole is just now becoming a developed world — a city planet.

Cities are remarkable organisms. They are the most long-lived of all human organizations. The oldest surviving corporations (Stora Enso in Sweden and the Sumitomo Group in Japan) are about 700 and 400 years old, respectively. The oldest universities (in Bologna and Paris) have lasted a thousand years. The oldest living religions (Hinduism and Judaism) date back about 3,500 years. But the town of Jericho has been continuously occupied for 10,500 years. Its neighbor Jerusalem has been an important city for 5,000 years, though it was conquered or destroyed 36 times, and it suffered 11 conversions from one religion to another. Many cities die or decline to a state of irrelevance, but some thrive for millennia.

Perhaps one cause of their durability is that cities are the most constantly changing of organizations. In Europe, cities replace 2 to 3 percent per year of their material fabric (buildings, roads, and other construction) by demolishing and rebuilding it. This means, in effect, that a wholly new city takes shape every 50 years. In the U.S. and the developing world, that turnover occurs at a much faster rate. Yet within all that turnover something about a city remains deeply constant and self-inspiring. Some combination of geography, economics, and cultural identity ensures that even a city destroyed by war (Warsaw, Tokyo) or fire (London, San Francisco) will often be rebuilt.

A hundred years ago, the 10 biggest cities were almost all in the West — London (7 million in 1900), New York, Paris, Berlin. These days there are 428 metropolitan areas with more than a million inhabitants. The top 10 list now reads: Tokyo (Japan, 34 million), Mexico City, Seoul (South Korea), New York, São Paulo (Brazil), Mumbai (formerly Bombay, India), Delhi (India), Los Angeles, Jakarta (Indonesia), and Osaka (Japan, 16.7 million). Barging into the top 10 by 2015, according to U.N. demographers, will be Lagos (Nigeria), Dhaka (Bangladesh), and Karachi (Pakistan).

One of the few popular writers studying the phenomenon is Mike Davis, a recipient of the MacArthur “genius” grant who wrote brilliant leftist analyses of Los Angeles in *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*. Turning his attention to cities in the developing world, he writes in his forthcoming book *Planet of Slums* (Verso, 2006), “In Africa...the supernova-like growth of a few giant cities like Lagos (from 300,000 in 1950 to 10 million today) has been matched by the transformation of several dozen small towns and oases like Ouagadougou, Nouakchott, Douala, Antananarivo and Bamako into cities larger than San Francisco or Manchester. In Latin America, where primary cities long monopolized growth, secondary cities like Tijuana, Curitiba, Temuco, Salvador, and Belém are now booming, ‘with the fastest growth of all occurring in cities with between 100,000 and 500,000 inhabitants.’” (This last phrase quotes demographers Miguel Villa and Jorge Rodriguez.) In other words, more and more news will be coming from cities most people in the West have never heard of.

Demographers talk about “push” and “pull” motivations driving the huge migration to the cities. Push feels like this: Life in your village is dull, backbreaking, impoverished, restricted, exposed, dangerous, and static. In the countryside you are at the mercy of bad weather, bandits, and disease, with nowhere to go for help. But visit your relative in town and you see what “pull” means. In the city, life is exciting, less grueling, far better paid, free, private, safe, and upwardly mobile. Will you put up with slum conditions for all that? In a heartbeat. “City air makes you free,” said the Renaissance Germans. History may view the European Renaissance as mild compared to the change going on now.

### **Squatter Vibrancy**

Let no one romanticize the conditions of slums. New squatter cities typically look like human cesspools and often smell like them. There is usually no infrastructure at all for sanitation, for water, for electricity, for transportation. Everyone lives in dilapidated shacks jammed together wall to wall, every room full of people. A typical squatter city, which may stretch for miles, has grown without a plan or government, in

an area generally deemed uninhabitable: a swamp, a floodplain, a steep hillside, a municipal dump; clustered in the path of a highway project, squashed up against a busy railroad line.

But the squatter cities are *vibrant*. Each narrow street is one long bustling market of food stalls, bars, cafes, hairdressing salons, churches, schools, health clubs, and mini-shops of tools, trinkets, clothes, electronic gadgets, and pirated videos and music. What you see up close is not a despondent populace crushed by poverty but a lot of people busy getting out of poverty as fast as they can.

Considered together, squatter cities are the scene of an enormous economic event, but it escapes notice because it's designed to escape notice. Squatters don't formally own land or property. They don't pay taxes. They take no part in any permit or licensing process. They pay no attention to government-approved exchange rates. And yet they thrive economically, charging each other rent for space in unowned buildings, employing each other in their unlicensed businesses, and selling each other all manner of goods and services. This is what is called the "informal economy," and it is to economic theory what "dark energy" is to astrophysical theory. It's not supposed to be there, but it is, and it is huge. How else do we explain slum-laden Mumbai (half of its 12 million residents are squatters) accounting for one-sixth of India's entire GDP? Its actual impact on the economy is probably greater still, because GDP figures don't typically reflect the full value of the underground economy.

Two recent books have penetrated the clouds of wrong theory about squatter cities because the authors spent time living in the shantytowns, studying what actually goes on there. The books are *The Challenge of Slums*, the 2003 global report by the United Nations Human Settlements Program, and *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World*, by journalist Robert Neuwirth (Routledge, 2004). The U.N. book is based on 37 case studies made all over the world. Robert Neuwirth researched his book by learning the relevant languages and then living for months as a resident in Rocinha (one of 700 favelas, or shantytowns, in Rio de Janeiro); in Kibera (a squatter city of 400,000 adjoining Nairobi); in the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar neighborhood of Mumbai; and in Sultanbeyli, a now fully developed squatter city of 300,000 with a seven-story city hall, next to Istanbul, Turkey. (If you want a vivid film experience of real squatter cities, see the work of Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles. His *City of God* takes place in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and much of last year's *The Constant Gardener* was shot in Kenya's Kibera district.)

Contrary to a common assumption, the U.N. researchers and Robert Neuwirth found that the wretched quality of housing in squatter cities is never the main concern of the inhabitants. Indeed, when governments and idealistic architects provide public housing, those buildings invariably turn into the worst part of the slums. The people who build the shanties take pride in them and are always working to improve them. The real issues for the squatters are location — they want to be close to work — and what the U.N. calls "security of tenure." They need to know that their homes and community won't suddenly be bulldozed out of existence.

Another piece of conventional wisdom that turns out to be wrong concerns crime. Far from being the hotbeds of criminal activity that everyone assumed, the squatter cities are often victimized by criminals from outside, because they have no protection by government police. (The exception is in Brazil, where the favelas are the safest areas in Rio, thanks to drug gangs taking on the role of community police; in the absence of government police, they enforce their own stronger version of public security.)

Squatters are tremendously resourceful and productive. In aggregate they are the dominant builders in the world today. They will do much of the work and innovation of building the cities of the 21st century and the global urban economy. All that the keepers of the formal economy have to do is meet them halfway

— help them secure their tenure and give them time to gradually join the formal world, which will no doubt be reshaped by their joining it.

Though the squatter communities have what the U.N. researchers describe as “cultural movements and levels of solidarity unknown in leafy suburbs,” they are seldom politically active outside defense of their own community interests. Nevertheless, governments sometimes fear their solidarity, and that’s why the bulldozers are sent, as in Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, to eliminate squatters (thereby helping commit national economic suicide). According to the U.N., three-quarters of all countries with large urban squatter populations have programs to keep people back in the countryside, and all are failing. That is fortunate.

### **Migrant Boomers**

Gradually a consensus is emerging about the economic value of rural-to-urban migration. This migration, “on the whole, acts to alleviate poverty in both the urban and rural sectors,” wrote geography professor Ronald Skeldon in 1997. He explained that the urban “informal sector, with its capacity to create an almost infinite variety and number of activities” and its “considerable potential for self-organization...can create a dynamic economy and society.”

The 2003 United Nations report on slums is yet more optimistic. The authors estimate that 60 percent of urban employment in the developing world is in the informal sector, and it has essential links to the success of the formal sector: “The screen-printer who provides laundry bags to hotels, the charcoal burner who wheels his cycle up to the copper smelter and delivers sacks of charcoal...the home-based creche to which the managing director delivers her child each morning, the informal builder who adds a security wall around the home of the government minister all indicate the complex networks of linkages between informal and formal.”

Unemployment rates, the U.N. report points out, are irrelevant in an economy that is largely informal, “because virtually everyone (including children) is involved in a number of economic activities in order to live, and the conceptual separation of workers and non-workers is meaningless.” Also meaningless is the separation of production and consumption when the family’s business is home-based. Some workers who have gathered skills and savings in the formal economy use them to set up shop back in the informal world: “By adopting the triple role of entrepreneur-capitalist-worker, they can achieve total incomes greater than comparable waged workers in the formal sector,” the U.N. report asserts.

Squatters bring rural skills and values to town with them. Building their own shelter is what they’ve always done, at a minute fraction of the cost of city-provided housing. Collaborating with extended family and neighbors in close proximity is nothing new to them, and neither is doing without elaborate infrastructure.

Social cohesiveness is the crucial factor differentiating “slums of hope” from “slums of despair.” This is where CBOs (community-based organizations) and the NGOs (national and global nongovernmental organizations) that support local empowerment play such an important part. Typical CBOs include, according to the 2003 U.N. report, “community theater and leisure groups; sports groups; residents associations or societies; savings and credit groups; child care groups; minority support groups; clubs; advocacy groups; and more.... CBOs as interest associations have filled an institutional vacuum, providing basic services such as communal kitchens, milk for children, income-earning schemes and cooperatives.”

Cities have been the wealth engine for civilization since its beginning. Thus the bottom line in the U.N. report: “Cities are so much more successful in promoting new forms of income generation, and it is so much cheaper to provide services in urban areas, that some experts have actually suggested that the only realistic poverty reduction strategy is to get as many people as possible to move to the city.”

The role of women in all this cannot be overemphasized. The U.N. report notes that CBOs “are frequently run and controlled by impoverished women and are usually based on self-help principles, though they may receive assistance from NGOs, churches and political parties.” One of the major effects of the move from country to city, apparently, is that it unleashes woman power. Experience shows that microfinance credit works better when provided to women, not men, and women are the more responsible holders of property deeds. The U.N. report summarizes: “In many cases, women are taking the lead in devising survival strategies that are, effectively, the governance structures of the developing world when formal structures have failed them. However, one out of every four countries in the developing world has a constitution or national laws that contain impediments to women owning land and taking mortgages in their own names.”

It is so important to free up newly urbanized women from their traditional role as fetchers of water and fuel that the U.N. report dryly recommends, “The provision of water standpipes may be far more effective in enabling women to undertake income-earning activities than the provision of skills training.”

The significance of religious groups also cannot be overemphasized. According to Mike Davis, “Populist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity (and in Bombay, the cult of Shivaji) occupy a social space analogous to that of early twentieth-century socialism and anarchism. In Morocco, for instance, where half a million rural emigrants are absorbed into the teeming cities every year, and where half the population is under 25, Islamicist movements like ‘Justice and Welfare,’ founded by Sheik Abdessalam Yassin, have become the real governments of the slums: organizing night schools, providing legal aid to victims of state abuse, buying medicine for the sick, subsidizing pilgrimages and paying for funerals.” He adds that “Pentecostalism is...the first major world religion to have grown up almost entirely in the soil of the modern urban slum” and “since 1970, and largely because of its appeal to slum women and its reputation for being colour-blind, [Pentecostalism] has been growing into what is arguably the largest self-organized movement of urban poor people on the planet.”

As the cities of the next 20 years evolve, they will increasingly bargain with the older cities, and with corporations, as equals. What will that bargaining look like?

### **New Cities, New World**

To me the most compelling image of hope in squatter communities is something you see everywhere — masonry and concrete building walls with ugly rebar (rusty reinforcing bars of steel) sticking out of the top. The rebar is there as an anchor for a potential new wall, in the expectation that eventually, when there’s enough money, another story will be added to the building. It may provide more living space for the family or another source of rent. The magic ingredient of squatter cities is that they are improved steadily and gradually, increment by increment, by the people living there. Each home is built that way, and so is the whole community.

Another common sight in squatter towns is a network of wires strung everywhere, carrying pirated electricity and cable TV, and pipes snaking in all directions, illegally distributing water. In Brazil, a country with a good reputation for helping squatters, Mr. Neuwirth reports that the cable, power, and water companies decided to stop treating the *gatos* (“cats,” the squatters who siphon off public services)

as thieves but instead as people trying to become customers. Working with the communities, sometimes through nonprofit organizations, they are gradually improving the infrastructure and building revenue in cahoots with a particularly entrepreneurial new customer base.

Over time, usually decades, squatter cities become real cities, part of the formal economy. Mr. Neuwirth points out that all of the world's present major cities began as disreputable shantytowns. Step by step, the new towns will join the global economy that caused them in the first place. It was the industrialization of agriculture for global markets that reduced the rural jobs. Global corporations, thanks to global oversight, often provide the best-paying jobs and best working conditions in town, raising the standard for everyone. Global NGOs, having learned to distrust national governments, go straight to the burgeoning new cities, where the neediest can be served most directly. The "agglomeration economies" that make cities wealth producers are accelerated, and in turn they speed the global economy.

It's easy to gloss over the enormous variety among the thousands of squatter cities in different cultures, nations, metropolitan areas, and neighborhoods. From that variety is emerging an understanding of best and worst practices — best, for example, in Turkey, which offers a standard method for new squatter cities to form; worst, for example, in Kenya, which actively prevents squatters from improving their homes. Every country provides a different example. Consider the extraordinary accomplishment of China, which has admitted 300 million people to its cities in the last 50 years without shantytowns forming, and expects another 300 million to come.

The new levels of communication and trade linkage worldwide mean that every city of size becomes in effect a world city, with the accompanying multipliers of cultural diversity, financial flow, and people flow. In the vast worldwide migration toward jobs, the poor hardly limit themselves to cities in their own countries. There is also a large population of global urbanites who live at large in cities. These peripatetics include thousands of professionals and many of the world's wealthy. (There are more than 7 million millionaires worldwide, according to Global Business Network.) We're still in the process of discovering how the totality of an urbanized world will differ from our experience of urbanized nations and regions.

How does all this relate to businesspeople in the developed world? One-fourth of humanity trying new things in new cities is a lot of potential customers, collaborators, and competitors. C.K. Prahalad's book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* spells out how companies can reach the poor and deliver goods and services at the interface between the formal and informal economies. Those concerned about widespread piracy of intellectual property (such as music, movies, books, software, and brand names) in emerging-market cities may want to follow the example of the Rio water and power companies and find ways to treat the pirates as people trying to become customers. The world should be attuned to what is going on in the squatter communities, because more than just music is coming out of them. Lively new forms of self-organizing behavior are taking shape there.

For environmentalists, the massive urbanization could represent a huge opportunity, though most haven't realized it yet. The "ecological footprint" of cities is indeed large (and well studied), but the per-person environmental impact of city dwellers is generally lower than that of people in the countryside, and it can be made lower still. In many regions the emptying of the countryside means that the pressure on natural systems is suddenly reduced. Replacing the widespread subsistence farmers and herders, who treated wild animals as pests or food and wild trees and shrubs as firewood, is efficient industrialized agriculture in more localized areas (with less herbicide and pesticide impact thanks to genetically modified crops). The trees and wild animals are coming back. Now is the time to set in place protection for the rural natural systems, so when people return, as they surely will, the places they return to will be on a path of increasing biodiversity and health.

As reflected in the United Nations' "Green Cities Declaration" last year, a worldwide movement is under way to reshape cities toward better ecological and economic fitness. The "new urbanists" rightly push for dense, mixed-use urban forms, plenty of mass transit, and limitations to diffuse sprawl. I would like to see ecological-footprint analysis of squatter cities, with their extreme density, low energy use, and ingenious practices of recycling everything. Maybe there are ideas there that could be generalized.

What the world has now is new cities with young populations and old cities with old populations. How the dialogue between them plays out will determine much of the nature of the next half century. The convergence of the two major trends, globalization and rampant urbanization, means that all cities are effectively one city now.

The demographic literature refers often to the "bright lights" phenomenon that draws people to cities. People want to be where the action is. Thanks to satellite imagery, those lights and that action are now visible to us from space. The night side of the Earth, these decades, displays dazzling webs of light on the continents, with incandescent nodes at all the metropolitan areas and a bright tracery of transportation corridors between them. That web of light is the sign to any visitor that they are approaching not just a living planet, but a civilized planet.

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## Resources

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United Nations Human Settlements Program (Earthscan Publications, 2003), *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*; <http://hq.unhabitat.org>: Statistics and figures to make visible the trends. As Mike Davis says, it’s “the first truly global audit of urban poverty.”