**The Modern city: The problem or the solution?**

Immediately we are in the swampy area of definitions. Maybe we have to go through that, just as long as things don’t get stuck there.

Elsewhere I have been doing some thinking about cities. The research for that is littered with adjectives: Smart cities; resilient cities; learning cities; enterprising cities; green cities; world cities; connected cities; global cities; hybrid cities; cyber cities ….. each label picking up one aspect of what a city is like – or more usually, what a city could be (or should be) like. Some cities are doing better than others on particular aspects but, overall, the terms tend to be more aspirational than descriptive.

The Metropolis exhibition has the rider: ‘Reflections on the modern city’. Is the modern city just another term for contemporary city ie any city of today? Or does it imply a city that is managing itself within modern concerns re transportation, globalisation, communication, networks, professionalisation, diversities (even superdiversities) of shifting populations and cultures? Is the modern city one that aspires to be – and is taking practical steps to become - smart, resilient, learning, enterprising, green, connected, global, and so on?

Over the centuries cities have had a bad press. In mid nineteenth century literature cities were, literally, Dickensian. To Rousseau cities were ‘the abyss of the human species’. In art cities were Hogarth’s Gin Lane. Cities, in 1880, were reported in terms such as: ‘Every room housed a family, often two’ or ‘In a cellar were father, mother, 3 children and 4 pigs.’ Such reflections magnified the Victorian fear of poor city dwelling, with the state of the urban poor being described as a ‘tumour’ or ‘a colony of breeding animals’.

These legacies locate cities as the cause of problems such as overcrowding, disease, criminality, rootlessness, hopelessness and so on down the long depressing list. At best there is ambiguity, with cities also potentially being places of pleasure and success for the few.

More recently, in sociology, cities have been the Chicago of the growing urbanisation in the first half of the twentieth century; New York as a place of bystanders; generally a place of social consumption as much as production; a place of social injustice. Politically the city has been a place of strong mayors and crackdown on crime in the face of flights to the suburbs abandoning a hollowed-out inner core to the place.

But those were not modern cities – either in time or in nature. The negative imagery, however, retains a lot of its power even now.

My own doctorate was focused on the ‘Social Construction and Reconstruction of Community’ in a late twentieth century, dense, urban, newly-constructed high-rise development: Modern but not modern enough for whatever we are thinking about here.

Only recently have there been substantial arguments that cities can act as the solutions to social problems rather than their cause. This is not to say that modern cities are problem-free. It is to say that modern cities have problems, not are problems. Cities continue to be heterogeneous but, across cities aspiring to be modern, there are common issues being dealt with. These include:

Housing: In the modern city this is less the issue of extreme overcrowding, and more an issue of housing supply to meet mixed and changing needs of different sets of citizens; issues of lack of ‘ownership’; issues of lack of balance in neighbourhoods; and residential issues for those needing more care or wanting security.

Transportation: Most cities still have issues of traffic movement and parking; and congestion around the city core; Cities may still be sprawling outwards faster than people are moving in, lessening the overall densities of population but creating more commuting. Modern cities put additional emphasis on developing decentralised networks of hubs, with fully integrated modes of transport and excellent high-speed access to the internet.

Civic engagement and inclusion: Modern cities want to effectively link residents to the wide range of dispersed knowledge of what is happening now and what might be possible in the near future as the city develops; An imperative is to enable residents to feel a sense of influence over decisions that affect their everyday lives.

Revitalisation of neighbourhoods: The agenda here is one of making purposeful use of vacant/derelict spaces; encouraging positive interactions between people; and closing gaps between localities on a variety of health/ education/ employment outcomes.

Sustainability: This is a broad topic and includes the reduction/recycling of waste; energy supply and use; dealing with larger-scale emergencies; and having sufficient skills to draw on to deal with issues of the future.

There are numerous separate innovations being brought forward to tackle aspects of the above: Access to wifi and local information applications via mobile phones and via street furniture; pop-up activities and spaces, to create short-term community opportunities; creative use of existing spaces eg shipping containers; food redistribution; creating more walkways and cycleways; and many, many more. Overwhelmingly such innovations arise in modern cities, where the density of people that once spread disease now acts to spread ideas as technology, tolerance and talent collide productively.

Although cities have contributed to problems of climate change they are well-placed to shift to low carbon activity. Cities have the critical mass of people to make scaling-up of solution both a challenge and a potential success. So long as it doesn’t get so high as to be counterproductive, the density of a modern city can act as a reducer of waste.

Cities are places of commerce and the generation of wealth. Cities attract businesses which pay business rates. Cities can thus generate local revenue to improve local services, with local decision-making to support city plans. This will often create debates with central government about the proportion of such locally-raised revenues that are retained and used locally.

Although a city may have recognised administrative boundaries, the processes of growth and change increasingly mean that it is the greater conurbation that is the operating force for the social and wellbeing of residents. In terms of governance this creates tensions between powerful city-regions and central government but also can leave accountability gaps across collections of municipalities with no overall governing structure in place. This, alongside any need to make governance meaningful to individual residents, can be a creative tension that can be a spur to driving things forward.

Improving the city life for all requires modern thinking and modern leadership, with a capacity to work both at the macro-level and with the granularity of understanding how the city works. In truly modern cities this means those people at the leading edge having vision and those people still living on the edge having confidence that the city has solutions for them.

Overall, it seems that there are many things to be optimistic about when reflecting on the modern city; the metropolis of the exhibition.