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Cities: Past, Present and Future

Saskia Sassen is an urban thinker and a sociologist noted for her analyses of globalization and international human migration. This essay will analyze one of her published articles, “Who Owns Our Cities?”, which is based on the “large-scale acquisition of land” and the shift in mode of ownership of these lands after the 2008 crisis. Sassen raises a question on who owns these properties and the city’s spaces that these organizations have acquired, and its impact on the future. The article supports the rights of the poor and middle-class people, where their homes are acquired and taken away by the wealthy and powerful organizations. The increase in the financialization of space in cities after the 2008 incident by foreign companies, organizations and developers was considered a new trend and an emergent phase in some of the major cities which are considered strategically important for setting up profitable businesses. Some of these cities include New York City, London, Paris, Shanghai, etc. In the article, she explains its details, why it matters and what it means for the future. However, I will be considering and analysing the impact that this trend has on the common people, diving deeper into this issue, which Sassen’s essay lightly touches on.

Cities have long been a center of attraction for people from all over the world, be it the rich or the poor. Indeed, this diversity is what contributes to a city's growth by bringing together ideas from people belonging to different cultures and backgrounds. In today's world, what we call 'major' or 'global' cities have had a long historical presence and people belonging to different classes, castes, religions, and color have all worked together harmoniously with equal contributions in building the cities that we know today and admire. The harmony and diversity are what results and has resulted in cities being the spaces of innovation, no matter how big or small. Sassen rightly points out that, "Cities are the spaces where those without power get to make a history and a culture." (Sassen). She is trying to tell us that even the people who don't hold the positions of power in a city, can do or achieve something greater that could have the potential to alter the city's future in a good way. I am convinced because these are the places where opportunities are abundant, limitless and open to everyone. If the people take advantage of these numerous opportunities, I don't see the reason why they can't make or be a part of history. However, with the current trend of acquisition that is going on, Sassen seems worried, "If the current large-scale buying continues, we will lose this type of making that has given our cities their cosmopolitanism." (Sassen). By "cosmopolitanism", she is referring to the sense of community and belongingness. Since the beginning, our society has been full of people from many different countries and cultures, which as a result, have been very open to different ideas and ways of doing things. She says this transformation (buying lands or buildings for business purposes unnecessarily) has the power to "alter the historic meaning of the city" (Sassen).

Sassen talks about how there has been a "scale-up in the buying of buildings" (Sassen), with the Chinese being the major buyers, and rapid development in mega-projects. Undoubtedly,

this has had a direct impact on the poor and middle class people living in these areas. While the rich and privileged are flourishing and living their best lives with access to all amenities and facilities at the touch of a button, the poor are being ignored and left behind stranded. The gap between the rich and the poor based on financial status is widening as the wealthy are acquiring the lands and properties and forcing the poor to move out, some who had been living there for generations. Suketu Mehta, a New York-based author, who is one of the finest thinkers and writers on the subject of immigration, uses New York as an example and points out in his article "Beyond the Maximum" that, "The most important form of exclusion these days is in housing: who gets to live in a city? (...) What happened to the good people who stayed through the bad times? What happened to the people (...) who kept faith with the city through decades of crack, bankruptcy, and garbage strikes?" (Mehta). Mehta is concerned about the situation of people who have poured their blood, sweat and tears even during bad times, but aren't getting what they really deserve for it. He questions the readers that what is happening now, is it really going to benefit our future? He also raises concern on the idea of inclusion and exclusion. As Mehta says, "cities are booming. Things seem to be going well for these cities. But who exactly is it going well for?" (Mehta). This leads me to consider that cities are progressing rapidly, and that's good, but at what cost? People come here with the hope of a better job and life, but to force them to work for long hours in conditions that they don't deserve and still not get equal status, good wage or a good house to live in is inhuman. This will result in deterioration of the city's value. Moreover, there has been a reduction in public buildings, and the increase in the private ones. The consequence being that now these places are no longer allowed for the common public. As a result, cities are losing their previous identity gradually, which used to be a place of mixity and diversity. Sassen attributes this as a "de-urbanising dynamic" (Sassen). This is so because the

small streets, public parks and slums are being replaced by huge megaprojects that have an effect on privatizing what was once considered a public space and was accessible to everyone. This is where I recall Mehta's words, that cities need to be "open, affordable and accessible" (Mehta) to everyone, as that is when there won't be a division based on wealth and the two extremes of society (rich and poor) will interact with each other.

The main intention behind this new trend for companies and organizations is to gain a strong foothold in these strategically important cities in its early stages of development. They consider these urban spaces a commodity, a good to be bought and traded. Another problem that Sassen is concerned about is the underutilization of these newly bought properties as these huge luxury buildings consume a lot of space but are never fully used. Their owners buy them just for the sake of buying and not actually living. They are "part-time inhabitants" (Sassen). In the past, where there were a number of people living in the same space before, only a handful live there now. As remarked by Sassen on these wealthy buyers, "they are astoundingly homogeneous, no matter how diverse their countries of birth and languages." (Sassen). She is trying to explain to us that these people also come from different countries and speak various languages, but their main motive is the same i.e. to acquire lands for profit for their own purposes, no matter the consequences. As a result, there is an increasing demand by the middle class for housing nowadays, most of them not being able to afford.

This leads me to consider that this trend, if continued, is undoubtedly going to harm the cities' growth and innovation in the long term. According to me, the people will gradually opt out of living in these cities, and move somewhere else far away. Thus, there will be a shortage of

workers and middle-class people, which constitutes the majority of the population. As a result, it will reduce the colourful vibe and environment in the streets and markets, bringing these cities to a standstill. Thus, cities will be a place only for the privileged, which would be a direct contrast to the cities of the past. I feel cities are not just made out of buildings, but they are much more than that. Sassen's ideas resonate with mine and I feel the present situation in cities doesn't look pretty and stable.

Works Cited

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