

Cities and liveability

Over half of mankind now lives in urban areas and cities keep developing all over the world. Four documents, which appeared between 2008 and 2011 – a book review from the Economist, a Newsweek article, a Guardian opinion piece and an illustrated advertising feature commissioned by Philips – offer complementary views of urbanisation focusing on cities' assets and drawbacks and the ways to make them more liveable.

Cities attract for many reasons: urban life allows people to develop their skills and favours innovation and collaboration as stated in Mr Glaeser's book, *Triumph of the City*, reviewed by the Economist. Places like Tokyo, Milan or Boston exemplify this capacity. Cities also mean education: the Guardian columnist says that Masdar, a city near Abu Dhabi, still under construction, has already opened its Institute of Science and Technology. And in developing countries people living in slums like Lagos or Kolkata prefer urban squalor to rural hopelessness as cities offer the promise of a better future even to the poorest. The advertising feature text insists on the economic opportunities: people can find jobs and businesses can thrive; the picture of a man walking towards an urban skyline conveys the idea that cities are indeed powerful magnets.

Yet cities face several interconnected problems. The rankings of American cities mentioned by Newsweek show that some have high carbon footprints, mainly due to the use of dirty sources of fossil-fuel energy. Sprawl is another issue: spread-out, car-dependent neighbourhoods, especially in the US, are bad for the environment and for people who do not walk anymore. The lack of public transport is described as an obstacle to cities' liveability and economic development by three of the documents.

How to improve the quality of urban life? All documents say that cities need good government and adequate planning to be successful. Policymakers have a major role to play in two key areas. First, liveability involves promoting green sources of energy to cut emissions as some American cities like Seattle have already done. Masdar is a case in point: as one of the world's zero-carbon urban developments, the Gulf city is powered entirely by renewable sources of energy such as solar power; it is car-free and provides city-dwellers with a public system of driverless vehicles. The use of cars should be limited in cities and access to transport means is seen as a priority in the advertising feature, mainly for economic reasons rather than environmental ones because it encourages the growth of business and the movement of workers. City governments must thus attract firms to their cities to make them more prosperous and more liveable.

Then the density of urban areas does matter. The Economist mentions Mr Glaeser's argument in favour of high-rise buildings: they make housing more affordable and are better for the environment, contrary to spread-out suburbs. Newsweek has another standpoint: "*there's organized, dense sprawl as opposed to just sprawling sprawl*" and gives the example of Los Angeles to prove that density can be compatible with sprawl.

Urbanisation is multifaceted and despite some flaws cities, be they rich or poor, new or old, are mankind's choice. Improving liveability is a huge task that requires political will, and there are many ways to meet the challenge of a sustainable urban future.