Urbanization Unbalanced Growth

When observing the chaotic, burgeoning growth of the modern city, the more erudite of urban planners will reminisce wistfully on how different it is from its ancient Greek counterpart, the polis, which Italian architectural historian Leonardo Benevolo once described as “dynamic but stable, in balance with nature, and growing manageably even after reaching large dimensions.”

The rapid and uncontrolled sprawl of today’s cities breeds anxiety not only among urban planners and architects. Experts in the field of public health are alarmed as well, for the apparent randomness of the urban dynamic is robbing the population of its basic health and well-being through unregulated environmental pollution, shrinking green areas, inadequate housing, overburdened public services, a mushrooming of makeshift settlements on the outskirts lacking in both infrastructure and services, mounting anomie, and the sheer numbers of neighbors who do not know neighbors.

Beijing, a city of over 17 million inhabitants, exemplifies this social alienation. Until the early 1980s, the Chinese capital was constructed as a multitude of “siheyuans,” or one-story complexes built around a common courtyard that were inhabited by three or four families who shared a single kitchen and water spigot. These courtyards were connected by narrow streets called “hutongs” that formed a grid from north to south and east to west.

This open structure greatly facilitated contact between neighbors, encouraged the sharing of resources, fostered relations between contiguous families, and enabled the elderly to care for children and share with them their passion for songbirds.

Because of these characteristics, these almost idyllic structures were described as “collections of small rural villages.”

Until the mid-1980s, only a few skyscrapers disrupted the harmony of the landscape. Today Beijing's panorama has the look and feel of the ultimate modern city, where, with few exceptions, these “small rural villages” have been supplanted by sterile, towering skyscrapers. This striking change is not limited to external structure; it has also dramatically altered the fabric of human relations.

Physical isolation has led to an increase in crime, destroyed the local sense of solidarity, and contributed to the fragmentation of what were once cohesive family groups. As the distance between home and the workplace has also increased considerably, workers now find themselves devoting what was once valuable family time to exhausting commutes in overcrowded buses or subways.