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Forum on “City for All”

Chairman’s Summation

A professionals’ forum was held in parallel to the “International Congress on Urban Sustainability: City for All” held in Qazvin, 2-4 December 2009. The Forum brought together over twenty practicing professionals and researchers to discuss and probe the concept of “City for All” within broader context of urban sustainability and sustainable development. Two meetings were held on 2 and 4 December respectively involving a mix of presentations and open-ended discussions.

The participants to the Forum wish to thank the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development of the I.R. of Iran, the Governor of Qazvin Province, the Mayor of Qazvin Municipality and IAARA for having made the Forum possible.

The participants, having had the opportunity to visit various parts of the city, are also convinced that the rich cultural and historic heritage, the vibrant urban fabric and the commitment of its leadership to constant improvement, constitute an excellent opportunity for the City of Qazvin to become a leading example of how cities can move forward in creating more sustainable urban space. The participants are also committed to supporting, each in their respective capacities, the translation of many of the outcomes of the conference and of the forum into actionable ideas for a Qazvin “City for All”. The participants further welcome and encourage the active support of the Government of the I.R. of Iran and UN-Habitat in this most deserving endeavour.

Overview

The issues that were brought to the fore were numerous, underscoring the complexity of urban life, cities and the challenges of sustainable urban development. They included issues of poverty and social exclusion, gender, energy, transport, building design, economic development, climate change, cultural heritage and the role of different actors and stakeholders operating at different levels and spheres of governance. The participants re-iterated the need to approach the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainability in an integrated manner. But they underscored the overarching need and importance, within the context of urban sustainability, to place people at the centre of all action and decision making – the true meaning of a “City for All”.

Megatrends: urbanisation, globalization and climate change

The discussions took place against a backdrop of several megatrends affecting all of humanity. These megatrends include rapid urbanization, globalization and climate change. It was noted that while cities have a critical role to play in mitigating climate change, and must be empowered to do so, they are also the victims of climate change. While it can be argued that coastal cities are most at risk owing to rising sea levels, it is also a fact that the people most at risk are the urban poor who tend to live in flood plains, unstable terrain, slums and substandard housing. In such a context, the concept of “City for All” calls for an integrated approach to mitigation and adaptation. Both require more rational land use, more resilient infrastructure and services, better building design, greater energy efficiency, and a more educated population and leadership on the opportunities offered by

the threats of climate change to rethink, retrofit and redesign our cities to make them more livable for all.

Place making

Making cities livable was in part encapsulated by the notion of “place making” where the disciplines of art, architecture, urban design and planning converge with those of community participation, local economic development and people empowerment to support local efforts and engage local communities in improving their living environment. Many modern cities have created single purpose zones separated by long distances that are one of the root causes of environmental pollution and social fragmentation. “Cities for All” requires that we redesign our cities around vibrant neighborhoods with a mix of uses and a mix of people. Numerous examples were presented and discussed of how such participatory approaches to urban and community development, at very different scales, are able to bring about the necessary changes in perceptions, behaviour, policies and practices that contribute to more sustainable forms of urban development.

Fragmentation of urban space, special needs and accessibility

Participants were unanimous in calling for all professionals and decision makers to avoid and reverse the fragmentation of urban space. This calls for the design and planning of complete and compact communities - the antithesis of sprawl and of single-use urban spaces. It also calls for avoiding and removing urban barriers that contribute to social exclusion and segregation - as commonly found in suburban developments and gated communities. It was stressed that urban form and spatial configurations have a major support function in facilitating the formation of social capital. Considerable concern was voiced on meeting the special needs of specific groups such as youth, women, children, the elderly, and the disabled, and how to do so without contributing further to the fragmentation of urban space. Ideally, all approaches to meeting such special needs should be viewed as entry points contributing to making public services and the public realm more accessible to all and as part of a broader strategy for inclusive urban development.

Shrinking cities and revisiting some basic assumptions for planning

The phenomenon of shrinking cities occurs largely in developed countries involving a combination of a shrinking and ageing populations and the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society. This combination often leaves large tracts of un-used or abandoned urban spaces, infrastructure and brown-field sites. It further poses particular challenges in engaging people that, by virtue of their age, often become less active, more reluctant to engage in community life and more resistant to change. Lessons learned in dealing with shrinking cities are nonetheless of much wider application. One such lesson is how to identify issues that facilitate the engagement of disenfranchised or marginalized groups of society to play an active role in community development. Another is the need to re-examine some underlying assumptions which have shaped urban planning practice. Some of these assumptions and planning tools are predicated on endless economic growth and physical expansion which, in many ways, are inimical to sustainable urban development.

Youth

On the opposite of the spectrum, most developing country cities are experiencing rapid growth and are made up of a predominantly young population. Up to 60 percent of the population of some developing country cities are comprised of people under the age of 32. Yet most of these cities have

little or no infrastructure or facilities that are youth friendly and accessible. In many cases, the lack of appropriate facilities leads to gender inequality particularly affecting young girls and women. This lack of youth-friendly and youth-accessible urban spaces tends to exacerbate the other social and economic problems facing youth such as poor education, lack of job opportunities, and a lack of voice in decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods. In this context, “Cities for Youth” can be construed as synonymous to “Cities for All”. Examples were given of how youth have been mobilized and engaged to help shape their space in the city and create meaningful jobs including in the area of urban art, dance and music.

Cultural identity and sense of place

The holding of the Congress in the historical city of Qazvin served as an excellent platform for discussing the issues of cultural heritage and sense of place. Besides the preservation and protection of historical monuments that provide a visual and legible link between the past, the present and the future, participants stressed that many urban spaces and places that are in daily use harbour their own story and their own significance to a given street, neighbourhood or community. While these spaces do not necessarily qualify as historical or cultural heritage, they are no less meaningful to the people who use them. They constitute important references for designing meaningful urban spaces and interventions that give true meaning to the concept of a “City for All”.

Parks versus gardens

An interesting example of designing meaningful urban space was provided by an ongoing local project for the design of recreational space. It was noted that in many countries and cities, local leaders, developers and planners fail to distinguish between a park and a garden, with the former intended for public use and access by all, and the latter intended as an object of beautification. It was also noted that a truly remarkable urban space of historical and current relevance is to be found in the Iman Square in Isfahan.

The participants ended their deliberations in calling for local leaders and professionals to seize the opportunity offered by the growing international attention being paid to urbanization and climate change to engage local communities, using such tools as city and community visioning exercises and design charettes¹, to initiate local actions on local issues, and as a means of furthering the link between local and global issues. A special call was made for all institutional actors to strengthen the capacity of local authorities to argue for and implement policies that will make “City for All” a reality.

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¹ Participatory design processes involving professionals, community members and stakeholders and the local authority.