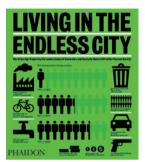
## The age of the megacity



Living in the Endless City

edited by Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic

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o one knows how it happened exactly, but it came uneventfully, perhaps in the early evening at the end of a long and anxious journey, when someone stepped off a train in Shanghai, or out of a crowded bus in Lagos. With this small step we all became a little more connected, and humanity entered the Urban Age, the era in the history of our species when the majority of people live in cities.

In the face of such a massive, fast and ubiquitous phenomenon we remain largely ignorant of what cities really are. The good news is that enormous enthusiasm and effort has started to pour into issues of urban security, sustainability and prosperity, and that a new breed of datadriven, interdisciplinary research into cities is emerging. One such example is *Living in the Endless City*, a polyphonic collection of essays that examine issues such as governance, violence, inequality, climate change and transportation in three of the world's developing megacities: Mumbai, São Paulo and Istanbul.

Like its companion and predecessor, Living in the Endless City is the result of the Urban Age project, a series of conferences on the spatial and social dynamics of cities run by the London School of Economics and the Deutsche Bank's Herrhausen Society. The essays are written by leading architects, urban planners, policymakers, authors, sociologists and economists, and are beautifully illustrated with strong and compelling photographs, as well as inspired new approaches to the visualization of familiar urban data, such as maps of wealth, population, transportation and urban growth.

The book is a reminder that cities grow primarily as the result of the social and economic aspirations of common

people. This diverse and often messy social city underpins everything else. Its social fabric is incredibly resilient both to natural disasters and to the more or less benign efforts of policymakers and urban planners.

The character and complexities of the social city shine through in the chapters on Mumbai. An essay by architect Charles Correa on the dynamic role of public transportation in Mumbai illustrates how mobility networks can bind together a myriad of ethnic and economic forces, helping to foster virtuous cycles of development and growing cosmopolitanism. Suketu Mehta's description of why so many people risk everything to move to a megacity such as Mumbai is one of the most compelling accounts of city life I have read in recent years. It is a punchy, personal, even political account of the struggle of some of the poorer inhabitants of Mumbai to exist and improve their lives within a system of weak governance that either ignores them altogether, or lacks the political will to help them realize their aspirations.

The tension between the social and material city comes to the fore in another essay, by the architect Rahul Mehrotra. He contrasts the more dynamic aspects of Mumbai, such as its informal settlements and its festivals, with the more permanent and official built environment. What emerges is an often forgotten aspect of cities: that they are evolving (social) processes rather than static things, and that these processes are the ultimate source of inspiration, knowledge, entrepreneurship and political organization for the city and beyond. It is through the management of social change — from migration and settlement to violence and entrepreneurship — that official organizational structures are tested and forced to evolve, a theme alluded to throughout the book.

São Paulo is presented as a richer and more managed megalopolis, suffering from the familiar malaises that undermine so many North American, and increasingly European and Asian, cities, including rising inequality, violence and a lack of alternatives to the car. Several essays serve as poignant reminders that fast point-to-point transport can unintentionally reinforce ethnic and economic divides

by facilitating physical separation and economic choice. Whether São Paulo, a city that grew up in the age of the car, and is home to some of the world's worst traffic jams, can develop an effective network of public transportation remains to be seen. This massive experiment may signal solutions to transport problems in many other developing megacities in Asia and Latin America.

Essays on Istanbul offer a more hopeful counterpoint to the severe developmental challenges faced by Mumbai and São Paulo. They reveal how Istanbul is a city in transition, engaged in the process of developing a more effective metropolitan government and integrating — at least partially and gradually — its informal settlements into mainstream society through a systematic policy of relocation, new housing projects and land development. Essays on Istanbul also remind us that the battles of economic and social development must first be fought and won in the megacity, which so often acts as the launch pad and the laboratory for new cultural and political movements.

What the book doesn't do, however, is offer solutions to the many issues raised. Although some suggestions for changes in transportation infrastructure, housing policy and governance are advanced in separate essays, they feel particular, piecemeal and traditional, and therefore fail to inspire new practical solutions. In this sense the book is more of a diagnosis than a cure.

Living in the Endless City provides a kaleidoscopic illustration of urban life in three of the brave new megacities of the twenty-first century. It is a visually beautiful reminder of the challenges and opportunities we face as we enter the Urban Age. Next time you find yourself in one of the world's new megacities, remember that New York, London or Paris once looked much the same, and try to imagine the extraordinary things that may happen next.

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