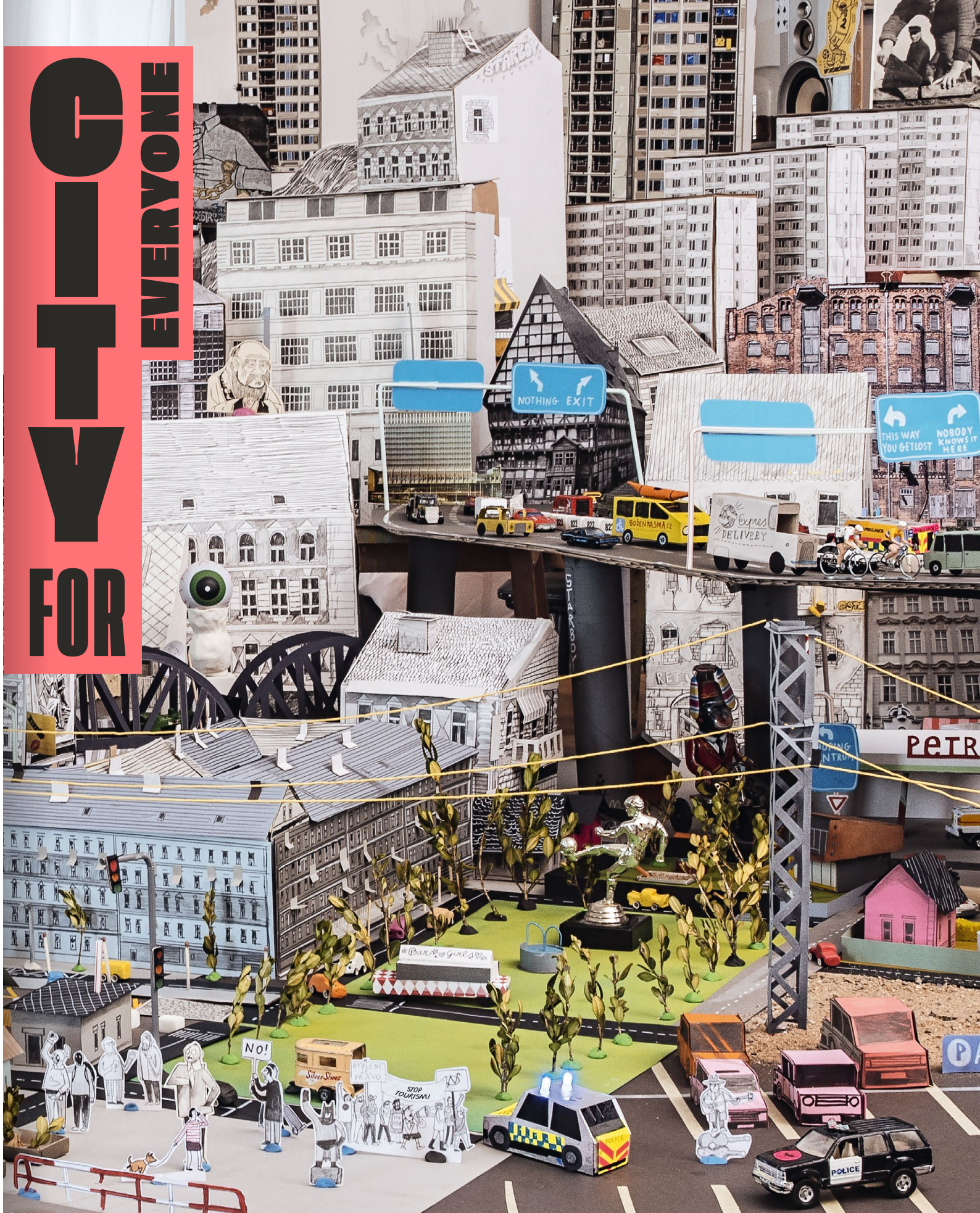
CITY FOR EVERYONE



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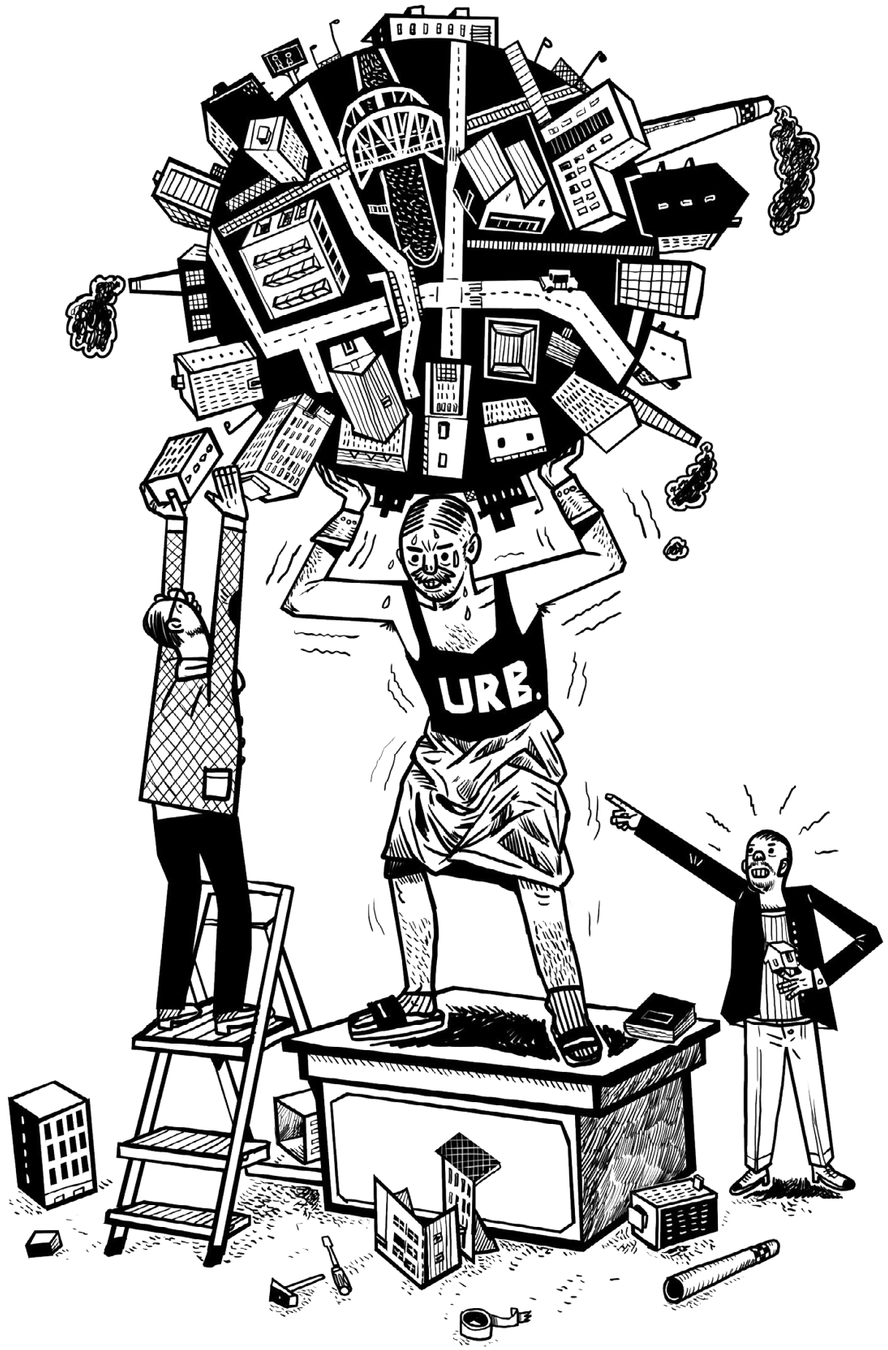


In 1990, the world contained ten megalopolises. Now there are 34, most of them in Asia. Tokyo, the largest megalopolis, has a population of 37 million.

WHY A BOOK ABOUT CITIES AND URBANISM AND NOT ARCHITECTURE?

When we think about architecture, we tend to recall particular buildings and historical monuments, perhaps an industrial hall. Architecture is tangible and its lines are clear. We take it in with our senses and intellect, it is quite easy to talk about, and many of us experience at first hand what the design and construction of a building—say a family house—entails. But how do we relate to something as huge and complex as a city? How do we read a city? How do we learn to view a city critically?

Increasing problems of space in urban environments have forced us to realize that solving small-scale building problems case by case does little to improve quality of life in a city. In most cases, such small changes affect very limited groups of people, their number dependent on whether the building in question is private or public. As practised by civilizations since ancient times, the art of urban planning directs our lives in many more, comprehensive ways.

Although the city is intrinsically an achievement of civilization, historically speaking most of Earth's population has lived away from towns, in close contact with nature. In recent decades, this situation has changed dramatically. Since 2008, more of Earth's people live in towns and cities than do not. The process continues to accelerate at such a rate that by 2050—yes, that soon—we expect that 75% will be urban dwellers. Urban population growth in Europe is far less pronounced than in developing countries of Asia and Africa, where megalopolises are growing at an astounding rate. (A megalopolis is a city with over 10 million inhabitants. In Europe, there are only two such cities—Moscow and Paris. The European part of Istanbul, which comprises two thirds of the city's people, and London are approaching megalopolis status.)

The city is becoming home to ever more people, who spend their whole lives in it. Increasingly, population density in cities is the cause of many problems. Let us compare the situation in rural areas with that of urban areas. In a rural area, when a serious problem like a long-term food shortage arises, village dwellers go into action and plant crops—potatoes, for instance. They adapt to their circumstances more quickly, so giving the population a greater chance of survival. Let us take another extreme example. An epidemic such as a coronavirus, the Spanish flu or cholera may take the lives of people in one village while sparing the populations of its neighbours. But when a global pandemic or natural disaster strikes a city—a complicated, tightly packed, fragile organism—the consequences affect the lives of a vast number of people at once, and as such tend to be far more destructive.

This explains why today's cities are planned like well-plotted military battles, with the drawing up of strategies and tactics and discussion of various crisis scenarios.

WHO DOES THE CITY BELONG TO?

Let us talk about public space in a city. A city is a community of people. A city is formed by the will of its inhabitants, who decide that they wish to live together in one place and perceive this decision as beneficial for themselves. City-dwellers prosper and feel safer. Edward Glaeser, a professor of economics at Harvard University, considers the city to be humankind's greatest invention. A city makes a person better educated, wealthier, healthier and happier. His opinion can be supported with precise data. City-dwellers live to a greater age, are less often ill, and have a higher level of education and earnings. It does not necessarily follow from this view of the matter that we can find happiness only in a city: we can enjoy a contented, fulfilled live in the middle of the woods. Nevertheless, this view corresponds to the majority understanding of what constitutes a life lived well.

The city is a fascinating, complex invention. That it is a human meeting place is beautifully illustrated by a photograph that captures the founding of Tel Aviv in Israel. A group of black-suited men are standing in the middle of a desert, surrounded by nothing but sand and camels. The sticks in their hands are for staking out the new city. This shot is a fine description of how a particular group of people can create and build a city out of nothing. It is formed principally by people, not buildings. It ceases to function as a space for co-existence when people are prevented from using its common space.

We hear a lot today about the privatization of cities and of public space in general. The result of this is that nimble go-getters take over space at the expense of others. Rich

investors buy up real estate in city centres, pushing out senior citizens and other groups who would prevent these investors from earning the high profits they demand. Such interference is highly detrimental to the social structure of a city. Rising social inequality can serve to detonate conflict. Today, even the wealthiest appreciate social imbalance is a growing threat to themselves. (According to the latest data, the 26 richest people in the world own as much as the entire poorer half of the human population.)

In settlements with high population density, we cannot rely on politicians and authorities to ensure functionality. In smaller communities, we see the continuing importance of traditional interpersonal networks from the work of voluntary fire brigades, various neighbourhood assistance schemes and direct, regular contact between inhabitants of a place and its mayor. In cities, however, direct personal contact is in decline. Most city-dwellers prefer to delegate problem-solving to institutions. But as cities grow and situations become ever more complex, these institutions lose the ability to monitor and manage them, resulting in a need for support at neighbourhood level and more active involvement of the citizen in the running and administration of the city. Let us consider the danger to human life posed by flooding. A crisis of such magnitude would be too much for a thousand officials. Effective action involves individuals prepared to fill sandbags, for instance. By the same token, officials can hardly be expected to walk pavements checking for potholes. Our concern here is ways in which citizens can be encouraged to cooperate in the forming of the city—by public engagement, crowdsourcing and acceptance of co-responsibility.

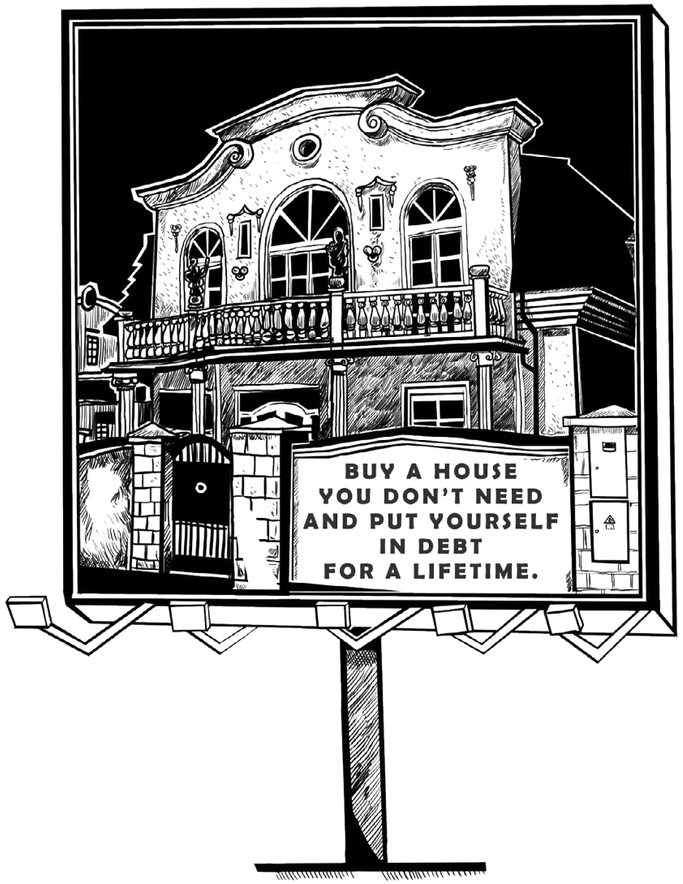
WHAT DEFINES A WELL-FUNCTIONING CITY?

If we barely notice the city around us, it is functioning well. Our quality of life is such that we are not forever coming up against barriers, dangers or problems of hygiene. A well-functioning city provides high-quality surroundings for a contented life. This is about more than just economics: it is about quality of environment, air and water. (Europe is one of few regions of our planet where we can drink tap water with confidence, something that is out of the question in most parts of China, India and Africa. The technical infrastructure of some cities is so inadequate that they are at the point of collapse.)

SUBURBANIZATION

& BASSES

The trend for suburbanization—flight of the middle classes to blanket housing developments on urban margins—resulted from disappointment in a badly run, hence dysfunctional city together with desire for a higher standard of living, tacit support for automobile transport, and clever marketing by developers and mortgage lenders. This process lacks logic and works against what makes a city a city. It toys with people's dreams by promising to place them in a higher level of society and improve the quality of their lives. Although advertisements for mortgage borrowing make everything look attractive to the lender, the greatest beneficiaries of processes of suburbanization are banks, building societies and property developers. The banks themselves place attractive advertisements for suburban housing in special online and print-form supplements. That people's dreams often do not accord with the everyday reality is encapsulated in the expression 'suburban hell', as used by American teenagers. In countries in transition, this may be an extreme (albeit now fading) reaction to past economic hardship, when people were forced to live in prefabricated buildings in close proximity, with little privacy. Once freed from this, they dreamed of a many-coloured private paradise where everything was possible.



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