



WAS NEW YORK ALRIGHT? ALMOST.

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The first instalment of the Urban Age’s cumulative sequence of conferences somewhat tentatively took the form of a question. “Is New York almost right?” it asked. And, of course, there could be no definitive answer to such a question when it is posed in the circumstances of a forum of practitioners, academics, politicians and their advisors. Yes, New York has got to be more than almost all right, if you happen to be working within the city administration. Elected city governments are in no position to suggest anything else. Or perhaps the more realistic of them might go as far as to say that New York is as all right as it can possibly be in the circumstances. But no, New York is not at all right if you are looking at the city’s apparent inability to formulate policy, or to deal with the multiple problems that face it, or even to get the cars parked on its side streets out of the way to make room for pedestrians. No, it is not all right from the point of view of the city’s disadvantaged, or its minority majority. Nor is it all right to invest in heavy transit infrastructure that it can’t afford to run in the long term - the same systems, as the conference heard, that some manufacturers are trying hard to sell to Latin American and Asian cities far poorer than New York.

But the question was asked in a rhetorical sense, as much to trigger a discussion about the nature of all cities of a certain size and history, with the intention of creating the beginnings of a framework of fresh ideas with which to understand and address their nature. In this sense, New York can be understood as representing one very particular form of the big city. New York’s history gives it an authoritative claim to be understood as the archetype of a certain type of contemporary metropolis. What Manchester in England’s Northwest was to the industrial cities of the 19th century, and as contemporary Shanghai may be seen as the distillation of the explosive urbanisation of the early 21st century reflected across much of Asia, so New York is the essential city of the culture of congestion. It dominated ideas about the city in the mid 20th century. Whatever else it may be, New York is not currently in the business of creating these buildings’ contemporary equivalents. And there are some who would see in that evidence of a certain decline in its ambition. The concerns of the city today might be regarded as more parochial in nature, of

managing what the city is, rather than reinventing it. And these could be seen as issues of a more local concern, rather than of wider interest. Indeed, the New York that once so energetically pursued the invention of the instruments of planning and building the modern metropolis without a trace of self-consciousness, is now in the same position as its rivals and peers, looking for models that have worked elsewhere.

To see New York in those terms, and to lament it, might be regarded as a position tinged by nostalgia for a lost golden age, far removed from the real lives and concerns of the vast majority of its 18 million citizens. But it was what prompted Rem Koolhaas’s provocative suggestion that “in an urban age, the city no longer exists”. By which he might be understood to be pointing to the divide between the old cities – London, New York, and Paris, and the new ones - Shanghai, Lagos, Jakarta, and just about any example of American exurbia. The latter have quite different characteristics, and are mutating faster than a species-jumping virus with an intensity, speed and scale that is eclipsing the old models. It was an intervention that prompted Saskia Saassen to make a carefully nuanced plea for the survival of the quality of “cityness”, by which she meant the transplanting of the essential qualities and values of old urban societies into the changed physical realities of the new cities. Casting a long shadow over the conversation was the battle between two unique individuals in the history of New York and in the wider history of ideas about the nature of all cities: Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs. They are figures that still have the power to sharply divide an audience in New York, and they might be seen as precursors of the debate between Koolhaas and Sassen.

One of the interesting things about this event was the chance it offered to measure the impact and resonance of these two points of view in front of an audience drawn from beyond the sectarian turf of New York itself. Participants could ventilate attitudes to these troublesome, inspiring, embarrassing presences in front of a group not all of whose members had grown up with their legacies. What makes it especially interesting to ask if New York is almost all right at this particular moment

is the way in which the city is in the midst of rediscovering the notion of planning a city based on an idea. For the first time in 40 years, New York is actively being shaped again, with a view not just towards realising pragmatic individual projects, no matter how large (and Battery Park City was very large), but towards creating a new waterfront, or a cultural district, or notions of creating new residential communities. The tensions within New York's community between urban thinkers and doers were faithfully reproduced within the conference. And the voices of those experienced in the labyrinthine separation of powers in New York became a touch world-weary at the naïveté of the tone as they understood it of the observations of those who have not shared their experiences and their burdens. And some of those visitors expressed a certain impatience with the inability of New York to understand the implications of what they saw as its complacency and insularity. In fact, the point of asking the question was not so much to come to some sort of conclusion about New York itself, but to use it as a model to begin a calibration for an examination of comparative approaches to the range of issues facing contemporary cities.

Urban Age in New York moved from the general - exploring notions of the oversimplification of the grain of the city that may be one of the outcomes of the global financing of urban development, to the particular - examining specific architectural proposals for Manhattan with slightly dizzying effect. Scrupulous efforts were made to maintain a dialogue that embraced as wide a horizon as possible. This was not intended to be a conversation only about New York - or about Bogotá or Washington or London, for that matter - but about the City'. Nevertheless, it was enlightening to take part in the Urban Age programme in New York just as the Olympic Committee's envoys were concluding their imperial progress through the city in their trawl through the candidate cities for the 2012 Games. The whole city was apparently gripped by just two urgent questions. Do they like us? And: Do they like us enough to choose us? One of the more pressing things that emerged from two days of talk was the very different assumptions of those who struggle with the day-to-day grind of manipulating the levers of power on their own behalf, or for the community at large, from those who spend their lives thinking about, and trying to understand, the processes that are involved. And these are different again from the mindset of those who see themselves as responsible for building the city. There were moments in New York when these worlds failed to engage. When city

leaders, with electorates to think about and a predisposition to see things from their point of view, are confronted with the view of the urban world through the eyes of an architect, there is at best a mutual incomprehension, or more likely impatience and worse. In itself, this friction is a significant conclusion to our research; if nothing else, we need to find the tools to make an interdisciplinary discussion about the city work, and, from that, to focus on the things that we can agree on and the steps that can be taken to shape the future of the city, insofar as it can actually be shaped. The wide fault lines between those who try to understand the city and those who try to lead it and manage it was made glaringly apparent in the reaction to those architects who tried to explore provocative models of the spontaneous urbanising tendencies of such very specific places as the underground subways of Seoul, or Tokyo, which have nothing in common with conventional western notions of civic life, but which may in fact have precisely the qualities that we look for in an urban age. We traced this scar tissue, but we didn't come any closer to healing the divide.

But this was the first in a series of conferences, and as the planning for the Shanghai event takes shape, it's already apparent how powerful a tool it is to take the leap from one such clear-cut model of what the city can be to the next, utterly different, yet eerily similar city. For, although Shanghai, with its population of around 20 million, is portrayed as an exploding city with little in common with London or New York, it is in fact a city of not such a different order of magnitude when you measure what the two Western cities really are, as opposed to their political boundaries.

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