A Manifesto for Our Urban Future, Together

Social media and online collaboration has enabled a greater level of connectedness, heralding a new era of belonging or global community through person-to-person collectivity. Entrepreneur and innovation adviser Lisa Gansky, Chief Instigator of Mesh Labs and the Instigator Collective, anticipates the impact of enhanced technology-enabled interdependence on the future life of our cities.
When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.
— John Muir, My First Summer in the Sierra, 1911

We experience the perplexing tension between brazen self-sufficiency and our irrefutable connectedness as we meander through our daily routines. We are already living the prototype of our urban future. Looking ahead today’s trends signal a more connected, agile and collaborative global community. Cities remain the seed bed for innovation, and innovation can only emerge from an open and optimistic perspective of our future. Technology plus people-powered communities and platforms invite unprecedented advances, coupled with a sense of belonging. While the last century saw the birth of the global corporation, we are now witnessing the nascent power of the person-to-person collective. We are deeply connected and must develop together to flourish as a global society.

**City as Platform**

For the first time in history, the majority of the world’s people live in cities. Cities, as never before, shape our experience and our future. They are a palpable platform for crowdsourcing our lives; they are our most pervasive, sustained example of humankind’s capacity to make, adapt and self-organise. Urban citizens are connected as never before, through mobile phones, meet-ups, pop-ups, co-working spaces, collaborative housing, shared transit services and globally driven local crises. Already we are swept up in Internet-driven change through the social media-fuelled Arab Spring and the Occupy phenomenon. Born in, and spreading quickly from, the dense hotbed of cities, they highlight the most essential competence of the next 30 years: our ability to rapidly, agilely and continuously self-organise, responsively re-designing our communities, companies and networks.

**Technology-Enabled Interdependence**

As physical proximity meets the digital footprints of our search queries, transit pathways, mobile chats and financial transactions, our ever-more connected activity is continuously illuminated. Data transforms the invisible into vibrant networks. For example, personal mobility data gleaned from ‘wearables’ reveals routes to run, cycle and walk; pulsing maps of activity constantly emerge from pooled data across various types of sensors. Imagine the hyper-dynamic maps and insights flowing as these data combine with connected vehicles, buildings and living systems. Such insights spur responsive urban planning, zoning and incentives to improve daily life.

While data reveals information previously concealed, our peer-to-peer interactions divulge who has what, needs what, when and where. The sharing economy has tapped into temporal ‘waste’, converting excess capacity to value and unearthing massive utility from what we already have. As a global community we have so much, but much of what we have we are not using to its capacity, including talent, goods and services. Existing online platforms already address some of society’s urgent needs, especially for urban dwellers. With platforms like BlaBlaCar, Neighborly, Huertos Compartidos, Couchsurfing, FabLab and Open Explorer we are already developing a new kind of social operating system, enabling us to solve local issues while opening a global dialogue. Tighter connections shift our social operating system from an orientation of the individual to the power of peers in collaboration.

Garrett Miller and Eric Fischer/Mapbox, Netherlands–MapboxRunKeeper, 2014

Data in motion. Movement mapped across space and time animates all aspects of urban life, allowing designers and citizens to spot trends and align opportunities.
Urban Hives

Cities, like living organisms, take shape as a perpetual process. No place is more exemplary of the temporal, flexible mesh of humanity than our cities. The combination of technology plus empowered people fuels accelerated open learning, sharing and innovation across geographies and sectors. Mutable pop-up experiences are a permanent way of life, while connected buildings and infrastructure are made robust and supple. Once networked, these assets can be effectively designed, utilised and maintained. Whole cities can adeptly reorganise in real time, anticipating demand and shaping local code accordingly.

In the years to come, as fluidity and adaptability become the norm, urban dwellers will turn to their neighbourhood to leverage local connections, physical assets and the strengths of their peers. Taking cues from some of nature’s most resilient citizens like honey bees, urban self-organising communities emphasise the social intersections or touch points within buildings, neighbourhoods and local ecosystems. As sharing economy thinking pervades our collective understanding of life, work, home and play, networks of people increasingly look to each other to create community-based confidence, wealth and resilience.

By 2020, expect to see leading cities explore the idea of Community-as-a-Service (CaaS), a concept that borrows inspiration from the software industry’s Software-as-a-Service or SaaS business models. This ‘as needed, access based’ approach invites local groups to create decentralised peer-to-peer production and distribution of energy, water, food, recycling and communications services. Self-contained, hyper-local systems will prove to be far more resilient and less expensive than last century’s ‘centralised’ utilities. These CaaS models will be refined and shared rapidly, allowing each new service to adapt to local customs and environment. Large-scale corporations will adapt by cultivating early signals of success, propagating leading models and innovators.

The Grid of Personal Power

As the carbon economy wanes and the demand for new solutions grows, energy production and distribution will spark from the power of sharing and creative collaboration. As each contributor generates power, communities will go beyond zero energy to build surplus. A new grid will form, each contributor representing a point on an open, shared power network. Experiments in personal solar-generation services are already expanding through the efforts of companies like GRID Alternatives and Solar Mosaic. Personal pods, walking, streets, buildings, parks and food are just some of the means we will use to gather the power for our cities.
Inspiration for solutions will continue to be drawn from nature. Taking the Fermat spiral as a muse, designers and engineers might partner to create a new approach to solar energy. When mimicked by a series of mirrors, the spiral would create a highly efficient and spectacularly beautiful solar array. Resembling nature’s own sunflowers, these arrays – ‘bloom powers’, perhaps – could soon grace everything from parks and buildings to homes and streets.

As we each generate our own energy, opportunities to ‘bank’ surplus come from the peer-to-peer, district-by-district mesh of hyper-local production and distribution. Run as a community-owned service, electricity – followed quickly by food and water – will be in the hands of local networks that generate, secure and deploy it. Centralised utility companies link neighbourhoods and businesses as producers and users of energy, water and other currencies. Those utilities that survive shift to an open-source platform model, connecting networks, sharing best practices and unlocking ‘innovation on tap’.

Resilience in Numbers

We humans will show ourselves to be a resilient bunch, redefining our ideas of shelter, food, wellness, work, adventure and community in ways that feed our families and our spirits. The crowed, which today is often experienced as a nuisance by-product of urban living, will be increasingly seen as a mutual safety net. Routinely, the people, communities and ecosystems best at tapping into the power of the crowd will rise above those who stubbornly remain unto themselves. This results in a clear bias towards banding together to solve our most profound challenges. Trust is the currency that fuels agile urban societies. Interactions become fluid through a global open currency – perhaps ‘bitseeds’, which will grow in value as community ecosystems develop and deepen.

The power of networks of people – shaped by demand and opportunity, propelled by open innovation – is the foundation for our urban societies. The momentum for urban innovation is the force generated by the push and pull between and amongst us as we look towards the future together. The more we embrace the tension between self-reliance and interdependence, the better future we will create together for our cities, and for each other.

Notes
1. John Muir, My First Summer in the Sierra, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1911, p. 87.
2. According to the United Nations, 54 per cent of the world’s population lived in cities by 2014, and by 2050 we are likely to see 66 per cent of the world’s population become urban dwellers. The urban population is set to grow from just under 4 billion in 2014 to 6 billion by 2045, including those living in more than 40 ‘mega-cities’, with more than 10 million residents each. Source: www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/world-urbanization-prospects-2014.html.