Future of the City
What Happens Next – 07.03.2022

Larry Bernstein:
Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast where the speaker gets to present his argument in just six minutes and that is followed by a question and answer session for deeper engagement.

Today's session is on the future of the city and urbanization. Our speaker is Deyan Sudjic who is the former director of the Design Museum in London and the author of the book the Language of Cities.

I want to learn from Deyan why its important that cities give you freedom with its anonymity and how that differs from village life. Deyan will re-examine some of Jane Jacobs insights on city life in the present day, and he will evaluate the success and failure of rejuvenating former industrial sites in urban environments.

After Deyan speaks, we are going to raid the What Happens Next archive and hear excerpts from previous episodes on the topics of urbanization.

We will hear from Howard Husock at the think tank the American Enterprise Institute. Howard will discuss the role of private market solutions for housing for the poor.

Then we will have a discussion with Mitchell Schwarzer who is a Professor of Architectural and Urban History at California College of the Arts. Mitchell will discuss the problems of zoning restrictions and the not in my back yard paradigm that limits new residential construction in California generally and Oakland specifically.

Our final excerpt from the What Happens Next archive will be with Edward Glaeser who is the Chair of the Department of Economics at Harvard and the recent author of Survival of the City: Living and Thriving in an Age of Isolation. Ed will tell us that cities are the center for economic growth and that we need to get back to face-to-face interactions for economic and cultural reasons and because it is so much fun.

I think you're going to love hearing the What Happens Next greatest hits.

If you missed last week's podcast check it out.

Our first speaker was Paul Kennedy who is a military historian at Yale. Paul has agreed to speak on a four-part series on the history of World War 2, and last week's episode was on The Battle of the Atlantic and the War in the Mediterranean. Paul is a very engaging speaker and I think you will love hearing his perspective on this historic conflict.

Our second speaker was Ilya Shapiro who was recently cancelled at Georgetown Law School, and the conversation was about the lack of free speech for students and faculty at America's elite universities.

Let's begin with our first speaker Deyan Sudjic.

I would like to welcome Deyan Sudjic to speak about his book Language of Cities. Deyan, please begin your six-minute presentation.

Deyan Sudjic:
It's impossible to talk about cities without thinking about Jane Jacobs. she was perhaps the first person to make it a subject open to the wider world. My first book about urbanism called a 100 Mile City was to revisit Jacobs and see how well her ideas stood up.

She talked about observing the street life of Greenwich Village and the ballet of the sidewalk. In my first book 100 Mile City, I looked at what the city has become beyond physical form to a sense of belonging and what ties those much bigger cities together. And the Language of Cities was my thoughts about what cities represent. A city is about freedom, that ability to be anonymous, to take from it what you need and to be yourself. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, we have this idea that the village community is a desirable ideal place. But the village though it has that sense of belonging and togetherness is no place to be different. A city is a place which offers that freedom.

In the present digital world, some of those qualities of anonymity that chance to be yourself are being eroded. Social Media means that there is no privacy and some of those metropolitan qualities are really under threat.

A city has scale to offer many different things, which gives us a certain sense of freedom. Big cities offer that chance for people to reinvent themselves.

I live in a part of London between Regent's Park, this utopian landscape, and Camden Lock which offers drug dealers, body piercing saloons. Every Saturday night is full of drunkenness and people vomiting into the gutters and it's what city life is about.

A city is about treating individuals as adults. Jane Jacobs acutely pointed out that urban landscapes are never frozen.

There's an area of London known as Spitalfields which is on the edge of the old financial core. And there's an 18th century building, which started out as a Huguenot chapel built by Protestant Weavers from France fleeing religious prosecution. That Protestant chapel then became a Methodist church and then subsequently became a synagogue and is now being used by another generation of migrants from Bangladesh who have turned it into a mosque. That is the sign of urban vitality, to coexist in this wider identity that is a big metropolis.

Larry Bernstein:
Jane Jacobs in her book The Death and Life of Great American Cities tells the story of a city always in flux. She uses an illustration of this through the life of an office building. It begins as a class A building with the top commercial tenants, and as the building ages, top tenants are replaced with accountants and lawyers and the building becomes class B, and finally with small start-ups as rents are relatively low as it is classified as a Class C building. For Jane Jacobs this is a natural cycle for an office building and that it is good. What is your take on the life cycle of an office building?

Deyan Sudjic:
A Class C office building is torn down to be replaced by a class A is wasteful; it's shortsighted. Certain building type are very hard to adapt. And it's not simply going from class A to class C office use, can a commercial building find residential uses. London at the moment and other cities are busy transforming some of those office buildings into high rent apartments.

Smarter developers, the ones that see a shopping center that works is one which are not simply international chains to occupy their spaces. That model of traditional anchor tenant in a shopping mall is discredited. Real estate development is too often a short-term business, but it should be a long term one.

Farming is a better analogy. There are times when a good farmer knows that it's good to leave a field fallow or in the case of real estate to bring life and generate new energies.

Like many cities divided by rivers, there's an east end and a west end. Usually, the west end is the more prosperous one traditionally, something to do with the way the wind blows.
And there's always a North and a South Bank. And in London, south of the river used to be where people used to go to misbehave. It was a pleasure palace.

Larry Bernstein:
The Tate Modern Museum was built on the other side of river in what was formerly a power plant. It started a whole new neighborhood and become a fantastic destination for tourists and locals. What is the role of a new cultural institution to a neighborhood?

Dejan Sudjic:
By building a large-scale cultural institution in what, as you rightly say, was once a coal fired power station looking straight at St. Paul's dome, Christopher Wren's masterpiece. It was the most terrible thing to build imaginable, but turning into an art gallery, one which has developed an audience of 5 million people every year has completely transformed the way that London works.

The Tate had the effect of shifting land values all around it. The Tate itself has not benefited from that rise in land values.

Larry Bernstein:

In some real estate developments, there are substantial positive externalities for a project. Disneyland had the effect of increasing land values next to the site, and so when they built Disneyworld, the owners purchased 100,000s of acres next to the site so that they could fully capitalize on the land site appreciation. Disney learned, and with Euro Disneyland, the company squeezed out tax benefits from the state as France was a net beneficiary as well.

Let's try a second example of changing neighborhood use. This is the story of the container ship. In 1950, Brooklyn was the busiest port in the world. There was an entire infrastructure built around the Brooklyn docks including warehouses, insurance brokers, and longshoremen. And when the container was developed it increased productivity massively. Workers did not have to take all the items off the ship to ascertain which goods were meant for Brooklyn instead of another distant port. Brooklyn longshoremen went on strike to stop the container, but it was a losing battle and Elizabeth New Jersey opened the container port and Brooklyn went from being the busiest port to no port at all.

The Brooklyn docks and its neighborhood began a long-term process of decline and eventual renewal. I moved to Brooklyn Heights after I graduated from college in 1987, and those areas of Brooklyn near the docks were still in total disrepair. Tell us about a neighborhood change in its use and subsequent rebirth.

Deyan Sudjic:
The shipping container was the lowest of low-tech changes. A metal box that was the urbanist equivalent of the neutron bomb. It wiped out not just Brooklyn but London's docks, Amsterdam, all around the world. Within a very, very short period, there was an utter transformation. And the first reaction in the community that threatened by that is fear. Where are our jobs gonna come from? What are we gonna do with these areas?

I moved to Wapping about the same time that you moved to Brooklyn Heights, which was in the heart of that Dockland area. And when I went there, I moved into a loft, and for three years I barely saw a green tree, a store and it really was like living in this moonscape. When I go there now, it's been through its Bohemian period, and it's now gone from large scale artist studios into tiny apartments, in subdivided old buildings and lots and lots of high-rise new towers.

Larry Bernstein:
There are three main approaches to rejuvenate the docks. There is a private market solution, where real estate developers figure out land use, a public solution usually with public housing or other public works, or a combination where developers build for private use and the government provides new transportation or schools. Please you use Canary Wharf as an example of a private-public partnership?

Deyan Sudjic:
Canary Wharf is now London's second biggest office district. And that change was never foreseen. It's planning is the law of unintended consequences in the same period that you described in Brooklyn, thousands of jobs went, and the state intervened. It was so concerned

that there will be nothing to replace those lost longshoreman's jobs, it offered massive tax benefits for anybody to build there.

And they assumed that what they might get an industrial park if they were fortunate until a banker from Credit Suisse First Boston realized that the same financial incentives that were there to fund the building of a refrigerated warehouse for a restaurant chain he was investing in could also be used for tax write-offs to build a 60 story high-rise designed by César Pelli. When this was brought to the attention of Mrs. Thatcher, there was a concerted bid to persuade the Reichmann brothers from Olympia & York who simultaneously to start building that high-rise by César Pelli. And having once been a busy European dock has now become the second financial center in Europe entirely by accident. And it opened before there was any investment in transport infrastructure. It's a crazy way of planning a city, it's brutal, but it worked.

Larry Bernstein:
Robert Moses tore down the slums of the West Side of Manhattan to build Lincoln Center. These were previously those fantastic 4-story walk-ups depicted in the musical West Side Story. And Robert Moses believed that the poor side of town should be replaced by Lincoln Center. Is Lincoln Center a success or failure? Do you think that private sector growth is organic, and that top-down public planning is unnatural?

Deyan Sudjic:
People have been trying to fix the Lincoln Center ever since it was finished. That period believed that culture should be in massive blocks. It's not only New York that has that cultural program in one place. London has its South Bank complex. Hong Kong, and in some of the Gulf states.

Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Why did the Rockefeller Center work so well? And Lincoln doesn't. But to go back to your original point about contrasting public versus private investment.

The model of Disney, Disney has tried to replicate around the world. They've built one outside Paris, which did require massive public investment. Tokyo did something quite similar. When France's intellectual left saw the coming of Eurodisney, they saw it as another example of American imperialism appearing on European soil.

How could you call the Manhattan grid organic or natural? A city to paraphrase Christopher Alexander, a city is not a tree, a city is not an organic growth. It is an idea. It is society's will on a landscape and to call private sector organic and the public investment in the city inauthentic or fake seems to be kind of way off beam.

It's an inappropriate term for what city making is like. Good planning is not limited to either private or private sector. Subtle, nuanced planning and understanding, it's a long-term business for both public and private.

Larry Bernstein:
A few weeks ago, on What Happens Next, Mitchell Schwarzer discussed the development of cultural institutions in Oakland California. Two wealthy families George Kaiser who built the Liberty Ships in World War 2 and a very successful health care business and the Bechtel family who built the Hoover Dam, worked together on philanthropic projects in their hometown of Oakland. They built a symphony, the ballet, and an opulent art museum at the time when those cultural venues were viewed as a necessary ingredient for a successful city to attract and maintain talent. This happened at the same time as white flight from Oakland, and the black community was relatively uninterested in the symphony, ballet or the white artists exhibited in the museum. How do cultural curators help the philanthropists meet the needs of a demographically changing local community?

Deyan Sudjic:
There's a yearning for authenticity, that sense that we are discovering places for the first time, that we're not in the middle of some artificial environment, we're not the subject of a matrix like experiment to find ourselves being manipulated. Between those two is the intermediary of the curator, the museum professional, and the understanding of what culture in all forms has to offer and an audience and an understanding of what that audience needs is so important to making an institution work.

I don't only write books, I was a museum director myself for 12 years. And my job was to understand that a museum has multiple audiences and find ways of being welcoming to all of them, to speaking to different groups in the community. It's impossible to say that certain cultural forms appeal to one group rather than to others.

When ambitious cities feel that it's important for them to establish themselves with iconic architecture and I'm allergic to it, but ever since the Guggenheim arrived in Bilbao, there's been a sad theory that all it takes spectacular architecture to transform the fortunes of a city is so destructive and misconceived.

Larry Bernstein:
The example of Bilbao is interesting. I went on vacation to Spain and visited Guggenheim's Bilbao Museum and then because I was there went to see the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, which I thought was even more interesting than the Guggenheim because it included a fabulous collection of Spanish art that just was not important enough to be on display at the Prado in Madrid but it showed great depth and range. I never would have visited Bilbao without the wacky Frank Gehry structure for the Guggenheim. Why isn't Gehry's work a success?

Deyan Sudjic:
My point was that it's the wrong lesson from Bilbao is that all it takes is one building.
The right lesson from Bilbao is it's a reflection of a strong regional culture with a strong national identity. The Basques do see themselves as a nation, one which reflects that culture and everything from the art that you saw in the Museum of Fine Arts, which its current director was

the director of the Prado in Madrid, he moved home and a fantastic focus on great food. So what Bilbao is a virtuous circle. It's invested wisely in the future. What it's not done is simply collect trophy architecture.

Larry Bernstein:
Next topic is beauty. How important is architectural beauty to the enjoyment of a city or a neighborhood?

Deyan Sudjic:
Beauty is the most difficult subject to talk about. There's Rem Koolhaas who said it's like talking about sex. It's the great embarrassment for architects. Talking about the Lincoln Center earlier, we were talking about how opinions of what is beautiful changes. This switch every second generation what was seen as being terrible suddenly becomes amazing.

Victorian architecture in the 1940s was seen being at best amusing, and now is priceless heritage. And 10 years ago, brutalism, that concrete style suddenly went from problematic to the subject of fan mail.

Every generation develops a taste for things which annoys its parents. It takes time for buildings to mature and the memories that they engender. It's the things that they allow us to see. Even in Warsaw, which has as its centerpiece, this gift from Joseph Stalin, the Palace of Culture, which is a 60 story high wedding cake, and was once seen as a literal symbol of Soviet cultural and political oppression, a colonial landmark in the center of the Polish capital. Another generation of young post-communist Poles, see it as a kind of a memory of pre-capitalism and look on it as a place they spent their youth smoking, going to cafes. And buildings do have that ability to change their meanings over time.

Larry Bernstein:
Robert Kaplan spoke on What Happens Next a few weeks ago, and he mentioned that the architecture in the Albanian capital built recently is a catastrophe. When should we knock down cinder block buildings that are ugly and horrible?

Deyan Sudjic:
Most things should not be demolished, embodied carbon needs to be in our minds when we think about demolition. Buildings that have the ability to grow, adapt, are much more useful than those that don't. So, yes, there are cases when those cinder block slabs are no longer adaptable.

Larry Bernstein:
You have a new book out entitled Stalin's Architect: Power and Survival in Moscow that was released in mid-June 2022. It tells the story of Boris Iofan and his effort to create Stalinist architecture. Why did you want to tell this story?

Deyan Sudjic:
Boris Iofan was born in Odessa. It was an imperial expansion by the Russian Empire, which turned what had been an Ottoman fortress with 500 people into an open city. It became a place in which the Jewish subjects of the Russian Empire could work freely in any occupation. The usual quotas were removed. There were no restrictions on Jewish people making their lives there and declared open season for migrants from almost anywhere.

It became a city in which the administration was subcontracted to a couple of French governors. The first street signs in Odessa were in Italian as well as Russian, so that non-Cyrillic readers could read them. It became for a while the most prosperous, fastest growing part of the Russian Empire. Because of that ability to attract talented gifted people to cite your example about opera houses, the French governor Richelieu built an opera house in Odessa before they built the first Russian Orthodox cathedral.

By 1880, it was a third Jewish, a third Ukrainian, the rest was a mixture between Russians Greeks, Italians, the French. And the Soviet system crushed that diversity as well as religious intolerance. Cities have that ability to be both a place of refuge from the oppression of the Shtetl, but also are places in which inter communal strife can also break out from time to time.

And the pograms of the early 20th century were the beginning of the end of the tolerance that made Odessa a special and interesting place. In the Soviet era, tolerance was completely lost, its flexibility, its openness had gone.

Larry Bernstein:
My maternal grandfather George Karp was born and raised in Sibiu Romania. When he was born it was part of the Austrian Hungarian Empire and was populated by a combination of Hungarians, Germans, Jews, Slavs and Greeks. Today the city is entirely Romanian. The Jews were killed by the Nazis, and the rest moved to be near their own kind. What are the lessons for the ethno-cleansing of Eastern European cities?

Deyan Sudjic:
Odessa. Istanbul and Thessaloniki had a similar mix. That's why authoritarians distrust cities. An urban identity is a much more generous, welcoming one than defining yourself through national characteristics.

Rome at the time of Christianity's arrival, the great cities around the Mediterranean, the North African coast, these cities had communities of Greeks, Egyptians, Jews. In Asia today, Chinese communities play a similar role in Bangkok or in Malaysia.

And we thought that the city was the future, and national boundaries might start to fall away, that the model for the future was Singapore or Hong Kong. And one of the disturbing things about the present century is that cities are vulnerable. Few cities have armies, can actually defend themselves against an authoritarian state.

Think about the city wall, every major European city that's more than 300 years old, had a wall around it.

Larry Bernstein:
Ed Glaeser spoke on What Happens Next about public health and a city's risk to pandemic and the spread of disease. How has COVID reintroduced that fear of high density living?

Deyan Sudjic:
Disease has also always been an issue within the urban context. Cholera was the great threat, before that plague, more recently the COVID outbreaks.

And that fear of disease is certainly what drove modernism. These ideas for flattening Paris to replace it with 60 story high-rises growing out of green fields was certainly a response to the cholera outbreaks that were killing thousands of Parisians every summer.

Larry Bernstein:
Modern cities are massive in scale. In the emerging markets, Mexico City and Jakarta are enormous, what do you think of their growth and managing these vast communities.

Deyan Sudjic:
Is there is a limit to the size of a city? If you look at contemporary Mexico City or Jakarta, these are cities which have populations in excess of most European nations. Spain is 30 million people, probably less than Mexico City. Jakarta is bigger than all of Scandinavia put together.

What stops a city going at civil war with itself? Think about Beirut or Belfast on a much smaller scale, these are places in which religious factions are so violently opposed to each other that cities lose that sense of cohesion and identity.

What makes someone who lives two hours commute from one side of Mexico City to another feel they belong to that same city? Or in other cases such as the Netherlands where effectively the whole country is one city but never say that to someone who lives in Rotterdam and works in Amsterdam because they know they're utterly different places.

It's football; it's the way that people speak, accent is amazing, language is a way that people identify who belongs, who doesn't belong. And language doesn't stay still in the city. The London I grew up in the 1960s, people spoke entirely differently to the way they do now. There is a melting pot in the same way that food has changed, bringing in the influences of all the people that live and work here, so the language has changed.

Larry Bernstein:
What do you think of the fictional city of the future like in Blade Runner and for me that is a dystopian nightmare?

Deyan Sudjic:

But I don't think Blade Runner does make it look like a living hell. Blade Runner was one of the first sophisticated attempts to show that the world in the future will not be squeaky clean. But at street level Blade Runner, which is meant to be Los Angeles, looks like a lot of fun. The noodles might be made of reconstituted cockroaches, but it's a great bar life, wonderful looking replicants. It looks like more fun than life on the top of the Trump Tower where the Decker Corporation hangs out.

Architects designing the future started referring back to Blade Runner's vision of it. In the popular imagination showed that messy reality could be more interesting than the neat well-ordered suburbia.

Larry Bernstein:
I end each episode on a note of optimism. Deyan what are you optimistic about related to cities?

Deyan Sudjic:
I'm optimistic that despite the pandemic, so many of those predictions about the death of cities have proved as there's often have in the past to be ill founded. The cities are coming back to life. They are reminding us how much we need each other, how much physical contact is so special about what it is to be human.