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Decoding Asian Urbanism

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ABSTRACT

The rapid pace of urbanization in 21st-century Asia is driven by a profound demographic shift toward urban centers, spurred by the pursuit of prosperity. This phenomenon aligns with Edward Glaeser's thesis in *The Triumph of the City*, which argues that urban connectivity is the most direct route from poverty to wealth. The scale of this urban expansion is remarkable, with a fivefold increase in the number of Asian cities boasting populations exceeding five million within just five decades. Meanwhile, entirely new cities are being developed from the ground up, covering extensive areas and challenging traditional timelines of urban development. However, this rapid urban growth poses the risk of cultural homogenization, as many developments replicate Western models that may not be suited to Asia's diverse contexts. These standardized approaches often exacerbate issues such as social inequality, alienation, and environmental degradation. In response, the initiative "deCoding Asian Urbanism" seeks to identify design and planning principles that genuinely address the transformative trajectory of Asian cities. The initiative underscores the importance of crafting interventions that balance the demands of rapid growth and large-scale development with the preservation of cultural identity. This research engages with fundamental questions, aiming to uncover the unique characteristics of Asian cities and explore how they can implement effective urban interventions while maintaining their distinct identities.

1. Introduction

A decade ago, the overwhelming intensity of Dhaka's traffic would have struck any observer returning after even a brief absence. What was once a straightforward half-hour drive from the airport to the city center had devolved into a grueling 90-minute ordeal. The once navigable 15-kilometer route had become a chaotic stretch where seven streams of vehicles jostled for space within four designated lanes. The very heart of the city had undergone a profound and disconcerting metamorphosis, transforming from a cohesive four-story hybrid-urban fabric into a relentless sprawl of uninspired 10 to 15-story residential and commercial towers—anonymous, incoherent, and devoid of any distinctive character.

Today, the phenomenal pace of development in the city continues to be driven by a tsunami of rural migrants seeking urban prosperity. The impetus for urbanization is not unique to Dhaka. In his

compelling proposition of the *Triumph of the City*[1] Edward Glaeser explains why the city's connectivity offers the clearest path from poverty to prosperity[2]. He notes that in the half-century between 1960 and 2010, about 40% of the world's least developed economies have become at least one-third urbanized[3] or more. This demographic shift and the resulting physical, economic, and cultural transformation of Dhaka and other Asian cities is fuelled by the flow of global capital and the transfer of technology and trade that result in unprecedented mobility.

While the scale of 21st-century urbanization is both staggering and unparalleled, over the next few decades, new urban development in Asia alone will likely exceed the last two hundred years of urban growth worldwide. In this relentless pursuit for prosperity, the sheer population of the cities has continued to expand. The number of Asian cities with populations of at least five million grew five-fold[4] between 1960 and 2010. This phenomenon will continue in the next decade as Asia adds over ninety new cities, each of them at least the size of San Jose, California. Not only will there be greater numbers of people, but the sizes of urban metropolitan areas will also expand. By the year 2035, two-thirds of the largest thirty cities will be in Asia,[5] and the urbanized populations of at least four of these will exceed 30 million.

Fig. 1. Daytime traffic near a flyover intended to relieve congestion in Dhaka, Bangladesh

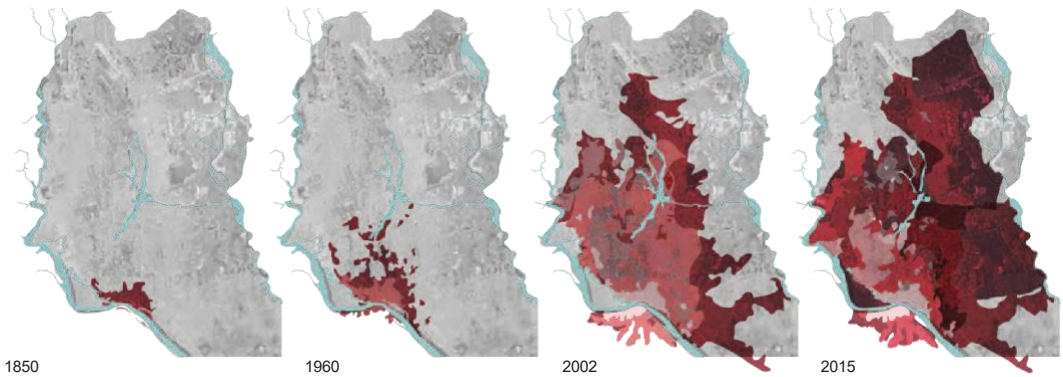

Fig. 2. Historical Development of Built Areas in the City of Dhaka from 1850-2015. Compiled by Kishwar Habib, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

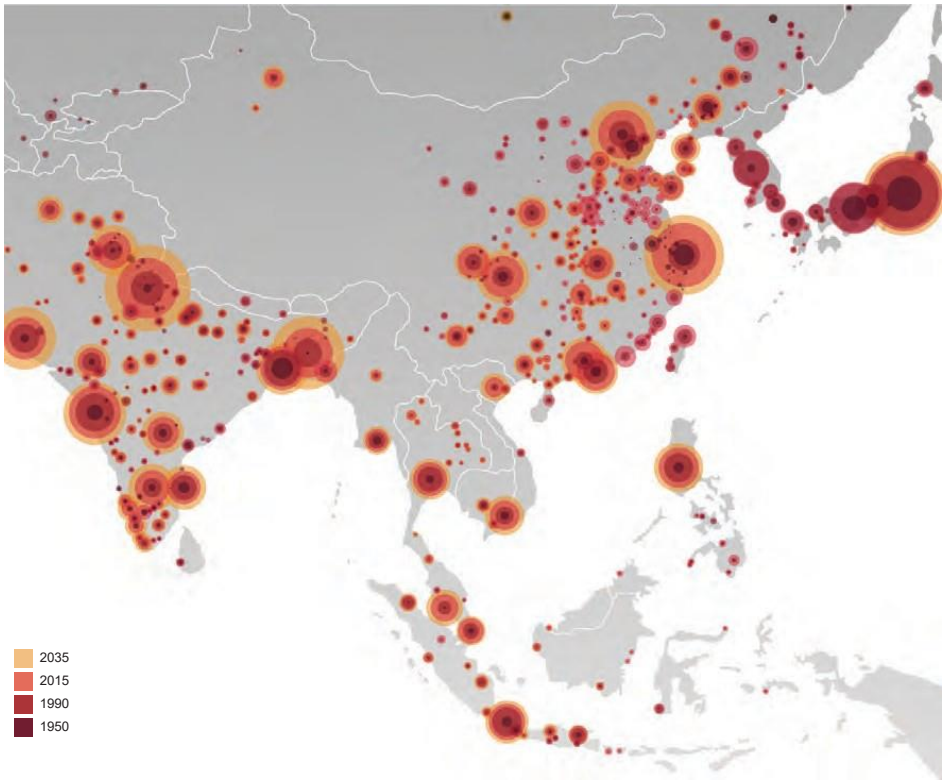

Fig. 3. Growth of Cities in Asia from 1950 Through 2035. Diagram by Ovgu Nurozler based on data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Urbanization Prospects 2018, World City Populations 1950-2035 using 3-D format from Human Terrain at Pudding.Cool

Historically, the design and planning of cities have benefited from the interventions of multiple stakeholders over significant periods of time. For example, the planning of Jaipur by Vidhyadhar Bhattacharya in the 17th-Century, or Ildefons Cerdà's 19th-century proposals for the Eixample in Barcelona extended over many years, and the implementation of their plans spanned decades or more. Even today, over 150 years later, the resilient framework of superblocks in Barcelona is evolving through the implementation[6] of green zones prioritizing pedestrians over vehicles. In modern-day Kyoto, the fabric of the Japanese Imperial City from the 8th century is still discernible and was itself based on traditional feng shui used in the 11th century BC. Chinese capital, known today as Xi'an in Shaanxi province.

In stark contrast, the new city of Xiong'an is to be built from scratch near Beijing and is planned to cover 2,000 square km in the mid-term, an area twice the size of New York City. The political scientist Bruno Maçães suggests that for China, enlightenment is a "vividly contemporary" phenomenon[7] where the global competition for power is embodied in economic ecosystems that are manifested in cities. In that sense, a manufactured instant city such as Xiong'an accelerates even the fastest-growing expansions of existing cities such as Delhi or Bangkok.

Fig. 4. Fabric of the City of Jaipur designed by Vidhyadhar Bhattacharya in the 17th century. Diagram based on collage by Melissa K. Smith posted at https://agingmodernism.wordpress.com/author/melissaksmith

Fig. 5. Ildefons Cerdà's 19th-century proposals for the Eixample in Barcelona showing plan of the neighborhoods. Drawing by Ildefons Cerdà | Sunyer, 1859. Museu d'Història de la Ciutat, Barcelona

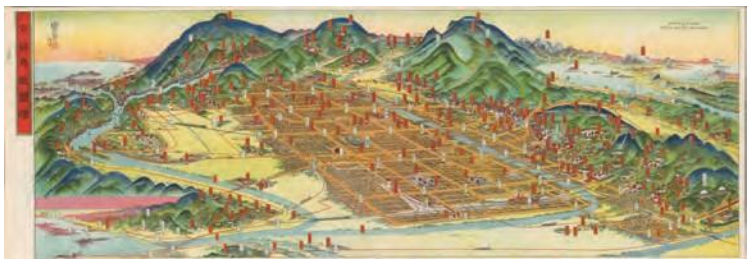

Fig. 6. Birds eye view of Kyoto and its environs, Kyoto chokan zue, Japan. Pocket Map prepared by Hoei in 1947. Published by the Tourism Bureau and Guide Office. From the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection

Asian cities have often drawn inspiration from multiple sources that transcend geographic boundaries. For example, the megacity of Delhi has assimilated Indigenous, Central Asian, and British Imperial influences while maintaining its own eclectic identity. In contrast, the rapid pace of development has resulted in a homogenization that no longer supports the evolution of unique physical and cultural identities. The impulsive response to accelerated economic growth has resulted in the mimicry of post-war 20th-Century North American and Western European models of planning and design. These have not been adapted to specific Asian economic, physical, and climatic conditions, nor have they respected unique social and cultural values. Instead, they are guided by formulaic global aspirations, rather than introspective strategies that embrace identity and culture.

Ironically, many of these models - such as the exclusive reliance on the automobile for mobility, are currently being reversed in their places of origin. Assimilating redundant transnational models of development further complicates the ability to balance and provide equitable access to resources resulting in social poverty, alienation, and environmental degradation, such as those characterized most vividly by images of Delhi or Beijing's hazardous pollution levels in recent times. Many Asian cities have resorted to building complex infrastructure to facilitate the automobile, interventions which urban planner Peter Calthorpe[8] identifies as "weapons of mass urban destruction" for urban liveability.

Over three decades ago, architect Charles Correa, the Chair of the National Commission of Urbanization in India, emphasized that cities are extremely complex mechanisms that are a function of economic and fiscal policies, as well as an expression of cultural and socio-political forces. In terms

of the physical aspect of the city, the Commission's report[9] noted that there is a “brutal mismatch between the form of our cities and the way we use them. How they could be refashioned to better suit our purposes is of particular importance because of the rapid urbanization that lies ahead."

The pace of development and the scale of Indian, Chinese, and other Asian cities continue to challenge their unique identities. The imperative to balance the inherent contradiction between a localized cultural identity and global aspiration is not a recent phenomenon, but the result of the dynamics caused by rapid change that demands urgency. While embracing modernity requires participation in a globalized civilization, cities must decode universal planning and design policies that inflect local cultures. Policy and design leadership need to adopt a strategic approach to existing infrastructure and resources while leveraging cultural sensibilities.

Fig. 7. The six-level interchange of the Puxi Viaduct that connects two of the busiest highways, Nanbei Road and Yan’an Road in the city of Shanghai, China

The challenges and paradoxes faced by the meteoric growth of Asian cities are the impetus for this project. *deCoding Asian Urbanism* intends to identify the design and planning principles of those urban interventions that provide an authentic and effective response to transformative growth. Its discourse embraces the premise that reshaping sprawling Asian megacities and improving liveability require innovative interventions that embrace the speed and scale of current development while celebrating cultural identity.

The critical interventions included in this project are innovative and transformational in their ability to revitalize and renew the urban environment. In this exploration, issues are confronted that are complex, intertwined, and sometimes counter intuitive. The key questions begin with the most basic ones: What distinguishes an Asian city from those in other parts of the world? How can the Asian city embrace effective urban interventions, assimilate appropriate principles, and remain authentic to its unique identity?

2. Background: The Asian Enigma

To navigate the Asian city, it is crucial to distinguish what is unique about its geographical and cultural setting. After all, Asia is perhaps the most heterogeneous region in the world. It includes almost a third of the world's landmass, 60% of its population, the fastest-growing economies, and the largest cities. Its economic, linguistic, and cultural diversity matches the vastly differing perceptions of what it means to be Asian. Even for an Asian. Countries such as Russia, Turkey, Israel, and many former Soviet republics from the Caucasus region identify themselves with Europe. Much of the Middle East from Iran in the east to Saudi Arabia and Jordan in the west identify themselves with the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region, extending to Morocco at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean.

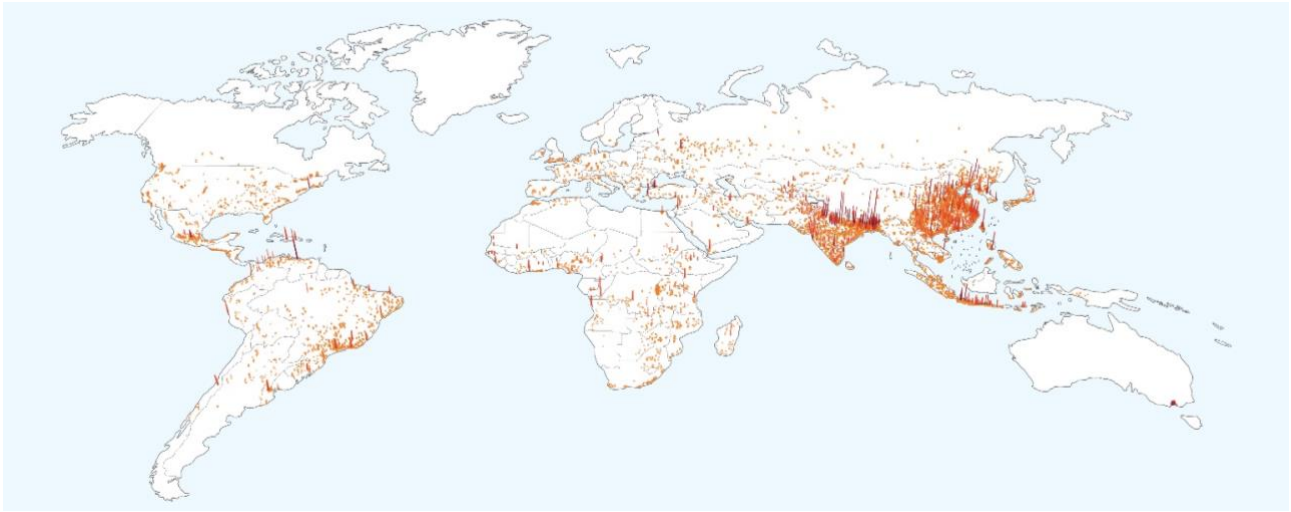

Fig. 8. Growth of Cities Worldwide from 1950 to 2035. Diagram by Ovgu Nurozler based on data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Urbanization Prospects 2018, World City Populations 1950-2035. Taller and darker spikes indicate higher population density. Lower and lighter spikes indicate lower population density

The concept of Asia was originally a geographic reference used by the ancient Greeks to describe the civilizations east of their empire. This association probably derives from the Mesopotamian empire's use of the term Asu or the "land of the sunrise."[10] This orientalist perspective of Asia is variable. For most North Americans, Asia is the land mass that extends from the Straits of Malacca to the Sea of Japan; or the regions we call South-East Asia, plus North-East Asia[11]. That is, from Myanmar in the east to Japan in the North. China considers Asia to include the entire geographic landmass carved out of Eurasia. As the world's largest economy[12], it is investing in the 'Belt and Road Initiative,' a reincarnation of the Silk Road connecting East and West. For the *deCoding Asian Urbanism* project, we have extended the definition of Asia to include the Indian subcontinent or South Asia. Although this is not quite the view from Beijing, it extends beyond the current Western notion of Asia.

Even in this relatively diminished geographical setting, the cultural, economic, demographic, and political diversity is vast. To situate complex issues of identity, resources, or morphology in perspective, it may be prudent to question whether there are existential archetypes or genetic codes that constitute the Asian city. Is the port city of Singapore different from Rotterdam in its identity? What role does culture play in establishing Beijing's identity expressed by the concentric diagramming that evolved from the Forbidden City? Is the urban theater choreographed by the vistas of Paris' boulevards a physical expression of cartesian logic?

Fig.9. Concentric diagramming of the Forbidden City in the heart of the Imperial City of Beijing. © Google Earth

If the mediation of a city is intended to engage its identity, it is important to clarify what distinguishes the Asian city. In an interview with Frances Anderton[13], the distinguished Chinese architect Qingyun Ma suggests that the Asian city is simply one that is inhabited by Asians. However, he qualifies this by identifying four characteristics that are relevant to understanding the Asian city today.

First, Asian cities have significant urban density, despite the availability of land and open space. With the exception of city-states such as Singapore or Monaco, their density is significantly higher than the home country or region to which they belong. Hong Kong's near total urbanized population of over 26,000 persons per square kilometer[14] is more than four times the density of its administrative region.

Second, they possess an inherent programmatic flexibility that allows segments of the built environment to be adopted and claimed by its citizens. This flexibility extends beyond the designed or intended program of either private development or public infrastructure. Ma observes that "*Life seems to be able to reorganize itself in a very nimble, flexible way and the function or the activities that happen around any physical construct are never programmed. All the Western prototypical theories on space, and publicity, and privacy is (often) nonexistent."*

I am reminded of my own experience navigating the phenomenal network of walkways In Hong Kong. They exemplify how pragmatic planning can engage topography to create a walkable city. On weekends, a significant portion of the walkways and public places are appropriated by overseas maids on their day off, who mutate these spaces into a collage of temporary meeting rooms that weave through the city. In Dhaka, sections of even the busiest roads are transformed into outdoor prayer halls on Fridays. Perhaps the best description of this particular social contract is that "a street is a room by agreement, a community room, the walls of which belong to the donors, dedicated to the city for common use," according to Louis Kahn, the architect of Bangladesh's National Assembly Building.

Third, there is a perceptible aspiration for a better life, where the city consolidates an innovative energy, projecting hope for the future. The digital connectivity of Seoul, home to a fifth of South Korea's population, is key to its designation by the Bloomberg Innovation Index as the most innovative country in 2021,[15] and for most of the decade prior. The dense concentration of technical talent in Bangalore has drawn some of the most innovative firms to the Silicon Valley of India. These firms in turn draw even more talent, followed by venture capital, creating an exponential surge that supports even higher aspirations and expanding economies. The World Economic Forum forecasts[16] that by 2035, the top ten cities with the highest GDP growth rates will all be in Asia, with Bangalore (8.5%) in the lead. The prosperity of these cities comes from their ability to nurture ideas. For Seoul, it was a

recognition of the power of digital connectivity. For Bangalore, its farsighted leadership emphasized education and embraced policies to strengthen human capital.

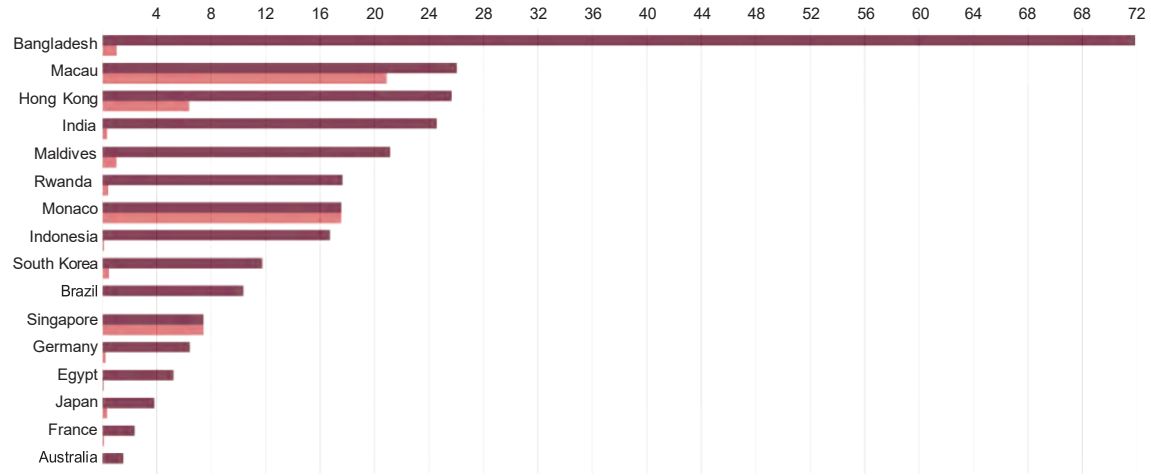

Fig. 10. Population Density comparing with urban density with country density in selected countries. Diagram based on date from the UN and the Economist Intelligence Unit, March 2014

Fig. 11. Domestic workers in Hong Kong take over the walkway system and mutate the network into a collage of temporary meeting rooms. Photo by South China Morning Post

Fig. 12 Friday prayers on the roads of Dhaka's busiest streets. Photo: AP

Finally, Ma emphasizes that urban development in most Asian cities today is a construct of a global land-finance mechanism that heavily favors large-scale development. In fact, he suggests that "you have to engage in large projects, create self-sustaining systems complicated enough to be qualified" for further evaluation and analysis. This mechanism may be leveraged to impact the city in a manner consistent with architectural historian Kenneth Frampton's premise that a Megaform[17] is the only effective form of mediation in the city as it is an element that "due to its size, program, and form has the capacity to inflect the surrounding landscape and give it an orientation and identity."

While contemporary Asian cities generally reflect these observations, they are inherently complex and distinct from each other. The imperial or colonial historical overlays of Beijing and Delhi, for example, have not limited either city's undeterred expansion, even as they assimilate a globalized culture. To reshape a dense complex system that manifests a community's aspirations, and enables flexibility within a globalized economic structure, is a substantial proposition.

The challenge with this global land-finance mechanism is that it is inherently impatient and vested in "building a global city," argues architect Rahul Mehrotra[18]. The iconic skyline that characterizes many Asian cities - such as the CCTV Tower in Beijing or the Marina Bay Sands development in Singapore - represents transnational corporate ideals or lofty state aspirations. Their program and typologies such as hotels, iconic skyscrapers, or airports reflect the aspirations of the globally connected, rather than the cultural identity of the city in which they are located.

Fig. 13. Marina Bay Sands, Singapore.

Fig. 14. The sprawling 2.5 sq km Dharavi Slum in the heart of Mumbai. Taken by Alfarnas Solkar on Unsplash

Such monumental symbols generally contrast with goals intended to create an equitable civic society. Instead, a large majority of the population is compelled to participate in an informal city, an ecosystem of their own making. The resilient Dharavi slum in Mumbai, or iconic bazaars across the continent, enables programmatic flexibility that is nuanced to local preferences and needs. To navigate this urban paradox of confrontation and promise, globalized wealth, and social exclusion, equitability, and aspiration, requires acknowledgement of how spatial and formal equations shape the lives of those who live and work in the city.

3. Methodology: Mediating Megalopoli

The objective of *deCoding Asian Urbanism* is to identify and examine how effective urban interventions are reshaping the contemporary Asian city. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep inequalities, particularly for those in the informal city where basic infrastructure is unplanned or inadequate. On the flip side, the pandemic has become a catalyst that reinforces the values of good urbanism. The importance of shared parks and open spaces, safe mobility options, and a sense of place and community have become evident during this period of forced isolation. In sharp contrast to the existential crisis of helplessness in Camus' *La Peste*, we do have the potential to proactively intervene in the wellbeing of the city.

Due to the unique juxtaposition of competing forces, strategic innovations are crucial in order to prioritize sustainable development. Effective mediation of the built environment is contingent on leveraging the dynamics of globalization. For the designer or policymaker, this means the ability to leverage the dynamics of place and identity on the one hand, with the incentives of global capital seeking returns on the built **environment** on the other. This perpetual tension within the Asian city parallels the predicament of modernization memorialized by Paul Ricoeur in "Universal Civilization and National Cultures"[19].

The methodology used to examine strategic innovations organizes strategically planned interventions that can transform the urban fabric for ecological resilience, providing a more equitable framework for prosperity. Strategy and decision-making by policymakers, planners, and designers can effectively percolate through the filter of program and form. The discourse on large-scale urban interventions might thus be organized into these five[20] categories, each of which are explored in this project: Megaform, Landscape, Transportation, Abode, and Workplace.

Fig. 15. Urban Interventions - Matrix identifying the impact of selected projects in Asian cities. Diagram by Ovgu Nurozler and Caglar Gokbulut

The research examines the impact that these Interventions have on the urban fabric and organizes these through five primary impacts. They are Engaging the Earth, Transforming Prototypes, Crafting Spaces, Enabling Mobility and Adopting Ecology. Furthermore, the research examines eight design tools that are employed to affect these impacts. They are Innovation, Connection, Integration, Regeneration, Extension, Transformation, Sustenance and Symbolism

Interventional Megaform engages the public realm of civic programs and spaces and has the potential to inflect the urban fabric by integrating landscape, built form, and infrastructure. Frampton[21] proposes that these have the ability for "topographic transformation in the megalopolitan landscape." In his definitive essay on Collective Form[22], architect Fumihiko Maki describes Kenzo Tange's Tokyo Bay Project as one that "creates a three-dimensional link that is a skeleton from which other projects may grow."

Interventional Landscape sustains the ecological balance. They have the ability to engage earthwork with built forms such as Sejong's Public Administration Town in South Korea. Other interventions successfully act as a catalyst for new development by transforming the ecology of places such as the Yanweizhou Wetland Park in Jinhua, China.

Interventional Transit infrastructure transforms the connectivity within and between cities in a manner that makes an exponential shift to prosperity or livability. The Mid-City Escalators of Hong Kong, for example, enable residents with the possibility to navigate the city's unique topography and geography.

Interventional Abode offers innovative options for living in dense cities. For example, the Met in Bangkok leverages the low-wind, tropical climate by expanding and extending living areas to carefully crafted exterior spaces.

Interventional Workplace engages climate and ecology to shape form and design. By embracing local bio-climates and the advantages of verticality, these interventions can better embrace dense urban conditions.

4. Findings: Urban Interventions

In proposing strategies for intervening in these massive megalopoli, Kenneth Frampton[23] asserts that the "gargantuan ever-expanding Asian conurbations such as Tokyo, Mumbai, Bangkok, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, etc. at fifteen million plus can no longer be regarded as cities in any traditional sense. The received discourses of urban planning and design can no longer be effectively applied to the mediation of such urbanized regions." In order to mediate at the scale of these enormous, complex systems, formal interventions must be of the same magnitude to effectively engage infrastructure, mobility, and ground form.

In revisiting the discourse on place and identity, Frampton emphasizes the importance of landscape and topography. As any built form has to mediate its relationship with the ground, any object that is sensitively integrated with the topography, such as Sejong's administrative complex, has the capacity to resist the process of commodification. Groundwork is thus more critical to achieving an anthro-geographic status than the iconic roof work of the freestanding building, symbolizing global commodification.

The urban design practice, City Design Studio, was challenged by these contradictions when invited to design a new community to attract talent to the international high-technology hub of Shanghai's Minhang district. The established planning framework comprised post-war 20th-century attitudes, such as differentiated land use parcels, superblocks, and suburban setbacks that encouraged point towers. We persuaded our clients to integrate a walkable fabric that would attract a talented younger cohort, encourage interaction, and facilitate innovation. Our proposals emulated Shikumen[24] housing terraces that incorporated Chinese and European elements. This Shanghainese interpretation of courtyards, paseos, and mews comprised nearly two-thirds of housing in the city over 150 years ago. We believe our clients could read the historical references integrated into our design that presented a more cosmopolitan street life.

In his treatise on the *Triumph of the City,* [25]economist Edward Glaeser establishes why cities have been engines of innovation and prosperity, by examining why physical proximity is more valuable, even as increased physical and digital mobility provide greater connectivity. The empirical research identifies several ingredients that determine success for cities across the world, including Asia. These include systemic advantages, such as a highly educated population in Bangalore that draws investment, the enforcement of property rights and law in Hong Kong that enables its famed walkways; or exemplary governance in Singapore, which moderates traffic in the city. These are complemented by policies that directly impact the city's physical form through innovative planning that enables high-density such as "Vancouverism," or efficient intercity mobility options such as in Tokyo or Incheon.

The success of farsighted planning matched by cumulative decision-making over time results in the choreographed urbanism of central Paris or Vienna. Given the meteoric growth of Asian megalopoli, the incremental refinement of an urban framework over time is a luxury few places can afford. Instead, cities such as Bangkok, Dhaka, or Jakarta must rely on specific, smaller-scale interventions within the urban fabric that impact the larger context of the city.

Fig. 16. Shikumen that have been revitalized as commercial retail complex in the Xintiandi District of Shanghai, China. Photo by Farooq Ameen

Fig. 17. The dynamic urban theater of the Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo, Japan. Photo by Denys Nevozhai on Unsplash

The site-specific intervention or "urban acupuncture" is limited in organization and program but is designed to restructure the immediate context and stimulate large-scale impact on the city fabric and functions. The goal of this "urban acupuncture" is to relieve stress in the built environment, just as its practice in traditional Chinese is intended to relieve stress in the human body.

The Catalan urbanist Manuel de Solà-Morales affirms[26] that the choice of a strategic location for the intervention is crucial in rebalancing the city's dynamics, much like the deliberate placement of acupuncture needles to balance the body's energies (yin and yang). For Solà-Morales, there are three steps for effective urban acupuncture that results in the revitalization of the city. Firstly, to observe the existing conditions of urban reality; secondly, to analyze the dynamics of the city, and finally to rearrange them.

As Solà-Morales suggests, observing the conditions of urban reality can provide great lessons about how to intervene. No description would have prepared me for the experience of the Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo on a late winter evening. The gentle waves of people, the inundation of kinetic advertising, the intensity of development, and the diversity of sound were highly choreographed urban theater. The fact that it is adjacent to the Shibuya Station, the busiest transit node in the city, and a district with some of the highest concentrations of buildings and people is no coincidence. It is the result of incremental post-war planning benefitting from the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Fig. 18 Public Administrative Town buildings in Sejong, South Korea designed by Balmori Associates. Photo courtesy Balmori Associates.

Architect Steven Holl[27] observes that this fusion of landscape, urbanism, and architecture is increasingly the adopted practice for designing the city. In his approach, development is used primarily to shape innovative space so as to create a new metropolitan experience. He emphasizes the importance of "phenomenological characteristics determining the qualities of urban life – spatial energy and mystery, qualities of light, color, sound, and smell." For Holl, shaping the urban experience and enabling functional operations are intricately linked.

In the process of *deCoding Asian Urbanism, several* urban interventions were identified for their potential to transform, connect, and extend the urban fabric, integrate disparate entities, regenerate, or sustain the vitality of a place, and symbolize aspirations. Many of these have demonstrated their iterative impacts over time; others are more recent projects setting precedents that will be tested over the next decades, and a select few are potent with possibility.

4.1 Engaging Nature

Asian cities have engaged the earth with diverse attitudes. Chinese gardens such as the Zhuōzhèng Yuán in Suzhou create an idealized landscape that expresses the harmony between man and nature. Zen gardens such as Ryōan-Ji in Kyoto are abstract compositions of natural objects to elicit mediation. Imperial Mughal gardens in northern India are highly disciplined geometrical compositions of canals, fountains, and nature.

In contrast to shaping nature in the city, the central concept of the 45-acre administrative center in Sejong, South Korea is to place the city in nature. The design by Balmori Associates invites nature to intervene, penetrating every component of the built environment to shape the city. The iconic symbol of the Public Administrative Town is the undulating 3 km long linear roof park in a spectacular lake-adjacent setting surrounded by hills. In contrast to iconic towers, the project comprises three strategies for engaging nature. The Flat City strategy where the built form encompasses up to six levels of civic

functions that are more accessible to citizens. The Link City strategy interweaves a mixed-use program, open space, and landscape thereby connecting people with government, and nature with built form. The Zero Waste City strategies integrate infrastructure systems to reuse waste and minimize pollution. The project successfully engages the earth and mediates landform, program, and energy.

Fig.19. Qunli Storm Water Park by Trenscape in Qunli, Harbi, China. Photo courtesy of Turenscape

Landscape architect Kongjian Yu uses the term Sponge City to describe the flood management capacity of the natural system where the natural wetland is used as a sponge. The 85-acre Qunli National City Wetland Park in Harbin demonstrates one of the three key strategies of this concept, that of retaining water at its source. In contrast to draining away rainwater, the stormwater park collects, filtrates, stores, and then infiltrates it back into the aquifer. It uses cut-and-fill methods to create a necklace of mounds and ponds that acts as a filter. Nature is experienced along a network of paths and platforms at ground level while a skywalk links scattered mounds allowing residents to have an above-the-wetland and in-the-canopy experience. The revitalization of the urban ecosystem is a catalyst for rapid dense urban development around this urban ecological amenity.

4.2 Crafting Space

The port of Yokohama was the first base of foreign trade in Japan during the Edo Shogunate in the mid-19th Century. The design of the Ōsanbashi International Passenger Terminal seamlessly extends the urban fabric of the city to its most significant natural asset, Tokyo Bay. The topographically complex Megaform incorporates transit infrastructure, inflects the roofscape, and integrates a large urban park. The observation deck has become the finale of a seamless network of open spaces linked by walkable streets to the waterfront Yamashita Park and the Shin-Yokohama Park in the heart of the city. The design by Foreign Office Architects spread the program to create an undulating terrace/ground composed of warped surfaces. The horizontality invites a remarkable connection with the waterfront that can be experienced as one walks to the terminal along the bay. If arriving on the expressway over Tokyo Bay, it is evident how the bold intervention reconnects the bay with the city.

Fig. 20. Osambashi International Ferry Terminal in Yokohama, Japan. © Google Earth

Fig.21. Urban plaza shaped by the atrium and convention halls of the Tokyo International Forum, Ginza, Tokyo. Design by Rafael Vinoly Architects

Fig. 22. Namba Parks projects adjacent mixes retail mall and dense commercial office uses adjacent to transit station in Osaka, Japan. Photo courtesy of The Jerde Partnership

The Tokyo International Forum is located between two of the busiest metro stations in the city, Yurakucho and Tokyo Station. Its reuse of the Old City Hall site at the edge of the Ginza and Marunouchi districts generates significant pedestrian traffic. The intervention by Rafael Viñoly Architects crafts a two-block public open space carved in between the atrium and convention halls which buffer the noise of automobile traffic and trains. Pedestrians walking through the plaza experience it as a seamless respite from the street, with a Zen-like Garden of Zelkova trees and sculptures. The plaza serves as the entry point to the soaring ten-story glass atrium of Japan's largest congress hall. The dramatic ship-like truss that hovers above transforms the structure into a monolithic floating light source illuminating the atrium and profiling it in the Tokyo skyline. The Tokyo International Forum is a unique civic megaform that shapes a fully accessible public space and protects it from the impacts of the surroundings.

In the megacity of Osaka, Namba Parks sculpts nine levels of interconnected terraced parks into a program that integrates public transit, a retail mall, a public amphitheatre, and a 30-story office tower in a sustainable configuration

Located adjacent to the Namba Train Station it is one stop away from Kansai airport, a major Asian hub. In the adaptive reuse of the former Osaka Stadium, the parks embed nature in the city, reverse the lack of green open, and mitigate a heat island effect. The design by the Jerde Partnership evokes rice terraces that sustained pre-modern farming in the predominantly mountainous topography of Japan. It establishes a prototype for an active urban open space integrated within dense development.

4.3 Adopting Ecology

The Solaris Tower is located in Fusionopolis, a research and development complex located in Singapore on the site of a former military base. Through the positioning of the building, the design by T. R Hamzah and Ken Yeang improves the site's biodiversity and conserves greenery to reduce ecological damage. Two towers are connected by a series of sky terraces across a passively ventilated central atrium. The ecology of the project includes more landscaping than the built area of the two towers. In fact, it integrates a 1.5 km continuous landscape ribbon where the basement level is connected through a cascading sequence of terraces to the roof garden. This adoption of ecology in the built environment demonstrates how to intervene and enhance a site's existing ecosystem.

Fig. 23. Solaris office building in Fusionpolis, Singapore. Photo courtesy of T.R. Hamzah and Yeang Sdn. Bhd

Fig. 24. Deep garden terraces of the interlocked two-story units of the Kanchanjunga Apartments in Cumballa Hills, South Mumbai. Photo courtesy of Charles Correa Foundation

Fig. 25. Rooftop of the Solaris office building in Fusionpolis, Singapore. Photo: Courtesy of T.R. Hamzah and Yeang

The proposed Ittefaq Bhavan was the design for an office building located on a linear site-oriented north-south on the banks of the Hatirjheel Lake in the center of Dhaka. Due to the alignment, the architect Kashef Chowdhury considered a planar glass envelope to provide panoramic views of the city. A vertical garden is proposed between the two envelopes of the double-glazed wall. The project intended to embed a living plant ecology to mediate the full glare of the tropical sun for the tall office building in a tropical context.

4.4 Transforming Prototypes

Located in Cumballa Hill in south Mumbai, the Kanchanjunga Apartments are less than a kilometer east of the Arabian Sea. The east-west orientation of the units allows them to catch prevailing sea breezes and the best views of the city. The challenge of mediating the heavy monsoon rain is resolved in traditional bungalows by wrapping a protective layer of verandahs around the main living areas. Charles Correa transforms the verandah and reframes them as deep garden terraces that are articulated as primary outdoor living areas for the two-story units. By interlocking different apartment typologies and terraces in an elongated Rubik's cube, the project embraces the density of southern Mumbai. The complex spatial organization provides an urban reinterpretation of the deep-rooted aspirations of the urban middle class for a classic Indian bungalow.

Shaped by an engineering response to typhoons, the Shanghai Tower is located in the super-high-rise Lujiazui district adjacent to the Huangpu River. The design by Gensler embraces a vertical urbanism, paradoxically inspired by the vitality of Shanghai's historic small-scale courtyards and neighborhood parks. The complex program is organized in nine vertical zones, each of which is a 12-15 story high neighborhood that incorporates twenty-one vertical sky gardens in nine vertical neighborhoods within the tallest skyscraper in China. These shared community spaces are created through a transparent dual skin and include shops, restaurants, and urban amenities. The building leverages state-of-the-art water conservation practices that establish unprecedented levels of sustainability. The Shanghai Tower offers the potential for a new experience for living and working in supertall towers.

4.5 Enabling Mobility

The experience of walking in Hong Kong is an epiphany in unwrapping the kinetic relationship between figure and ground. The dramatic topography of Hong Kong is navigated by a phenomenal three-dimensional network of pedestrian sidewalks, escalators, elevated walkways, and subterranean tunnels. The city's unique urbanism balances the need for shared pedestrian mobility and a desire for private incentives. Pedestrian mobility is the result of an incremental intersection of comprehensive planning and everyday pragmatism. Pedestrians can take the 800m long Central Mid-Levels Escalators in Hong Kong Island, discovering a new community at every "landing" or cross-street, each with its own subculture. Nearly 150 m lower, a walkway system allows people to meander through lobbies of private buildings, enter malls, traverse multiple lanes of traffic and arrive at the Star Ferry Pier without ever touching ground. Hong Kong's walkway system offers an example of how to enable pedestrian mobility and alternative configurations for public space in a dense urban context.

At the other end of the scale is global connectivity manifested in the Airport as a global city. There is a dynamic exchange between traveling "visitors" and working "citizens," experienced in 90-minute increments between landside and airside zones. As with Inchoen's new terminal, architect Terence Young[28] proposes that airports should be reframed as cities that reflect the cultures that they represent. Seven of the ten most highly regarded[29] airports are in Asia, and they offer the amenities of great cities: a high regard for health and well-being, art and culture, and most importantly great local food, a more authentic representation of place. Post-pandemic, airports will continue to be the most important nodes

of global connectivity. They offer a new perception of proximity that is increasingly accessible to more people. Like many other hub airports in Asia, Inchoen in Seoul provides access to nearly 30% of the world's population within a six-hour flight. To facilitate innovation, the governance of Asian megalopoli prioritize their airports recognizing that they are the nodes of connectivity for inter-city dynamics.

Fig. 26. Elevated walkways traverse multiple lanes of roadway and transit infrastructure between Wanchai and the Star Ferry terminal on Hong Kong island. Photo by Farooq Ameen

5. Conclusion: Considering a Manifesto

This research on "deCoding Asian Urbanism" seeks to foster a meaningful dialogue among designers, policymakers, and public officials who are actively shaping the future of Asian cities. Unlike a traditional manifesto that dictates a singular vision or approach, this initiative encourages an adaptive perspective on city-making that considers the complex interplay of place, culture, and diaspora. As the flow of migration from Asia continues to grow and economic connections deepen globally, understanding the impact of Asian Urbanism becomes increasingly critical for urban life across the world, whether in Los Angeles, Berlin, or Mumbai. The evolving dynamics of Asian cities present unique challenges and opportunities, demanding a nuanced approach to urban planning that can respond to the diverse needs of a rapidly changing population.

Urban theorist Saskia Sassen[30] notes that “the formation of inter-city geographies contributes a critical infrastructure for a new global political economy, new cultural spaces, and new types of politics.” This observation underscores the importance of relationships between principal cities in shaping their viability and capacity for innovation[31]. For instance, in Los Angeles, the influence of Asian urban models is evident in areas like Koreatown, where urban typologies from Seoul, such as multi-level golf ranges atop parking structures, have been adopted. Similarly, the design of the tallest building in downtown Los Angeles, with its penthouse-level hotel lobby, draws inspiration from Singapore. These examples illustrate how the cross-pollination of ideas between Asian and Western cities is creating new urban forms that reflect the globalized nature of city-making today.

5.1 Implications

The influence of the Asian diaspora on global urbanism is poised to expand as the world adjusts to a new balance of power, where over 45% of global wealth is now generated in Asia. This economic shift has significant implications for the growth and development of Asian cities, which are expected to continue expanding in size, scale, and density. As these cities grow, they will also face mounting

challenges, including increasing disparities in wealth and access to resources. The concept of an urban "time bomb," as articulated by Rahul Mehrotra[32], highlights the urgent need for innovative, three-dimensional solutions to address these complex challenges. Asian cities must strike a delicate balance between supporting a growing population, providing adequate open space, and ensuring mobility options within a sustainable framework.

The interventions highlighted in various Asian cities demonstrate the potential for comprehensive planning and incremental change to mediate dense communities and engage with nature. By carefully balancing public needs with private aspirations, these urban interventions offer a model for sustainable city-making that can be adapted to other global contexts. The continued growth and evolution of Asian cities, as observed by Qingyun Ma, suggest that they will remain centers of hope and aspiration for the future. However, this growth must be managed carefully to ensure that it does not exacerbate existing inequalities or environmental challenges.

5.2 Limitations

Despite the optimism surrounding the future of Asian urbanism, several limitations must be acknowledged. One significant limitation is the inherent complexity of Asian cities, which often feature overlapping and interlocking challenges that are difficult to address through conventional urban planning approaches. For example, the city of Dhaka presents a unique set of challenges that require tenacity and a deep understanding of the local context[33]. The complexity of such cities often demands innovative, context-specific solutions that may not be easily replicable in other settings.

Moreover, the rapid pace of urbanization in Asia has led to significant disparities in wealth and access to resources, which can undermine efforts to create inclusive and sustainable cities. The growing economic divide between different segments of the population poses a significant challenge to the goal of creating equitable urban environments. Additionally, the environmental impact of rapid urbanization, including issues related to pollution, resource depletion, and loss of green spaces, presents a significant challenge that must be addressed in future urban planning efforts.

5.3 Future Recommendations

Looking forward, it is essential to continue fostering dialogue and collaboration between designers, policymakers, and public officials to address the complex challenges of Asian urbanism. One key recommendation is to adopt a flexible and adaptive approach to city-making that can respond to the evolving needs of rapidly growing urban populations. This approach should prioritize the integration of sustainable practices, including the preservation of green spaces, the promotion of public transportation, and the development of resilient infrastructure.

Another important recommendation is to focus on addressing the disparities in wealth and access to resources that have emerged as a result of rapid urbanization. This could involve implementing policies that promote affordable housing, equitable access to education and healthcare, and the development of inclusive public spaces. By addressing these disparities, cities can create more equitable environments that benefit all residents.

Finally, it is crucial to embrace the idea of "simplicity in complexity," as suggested by designer John Maeda[34]. This involves identifying and focusing on the most meaningful and impactful elements of urban design, while discarding those that are less effective. By embracing this approach, urban planners can create more effective and sustainable cities that meet the needs of diverse populations.

In conclusion, the future of Asian urbanism holds both challenges and opportunities. By continuing to foster dialogue and collaboration, adopting flexible and adaptive approaches to city-making, and addressing the disparities that have emerged as a result of rapid urbanization, cities can navigate the complexities of urban growth and create sustainable, equitable environments for all residents.

Fig. 27. 6-hour radius of flights from Incheon Airport in Seoul Korea superimposed on the current Korean Airlines network. Diagram by Ovgu Nurozler and Noah Zaccaglini based on the 2019 Korean Airlines network map

Fig. 28. Multiple-level golf range over the parking structure of development in Koreatown, Los Angeles. Taken from 20dollardate. 4 Feb. 2017, twentydollardate.com/out-and-about/aroma-golf- driving-range-date/

Fig. 29. Hong Kong Bay and Tsim Sha Tsui skyline from the Peak on Hong Kong Island. Photo by Ryan McManimie on Unsplash

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