



"Designers and diplomats must work more closely together"



Ian Klaus | 12 October 2016

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The design community and foreign policymakers need to attend each other's events and communicate, if we are to find solutions to global urbanisation issues, says US Department of State advisor Ian Klaus.

London Design Biennale kicked off at Somerset House along the River Thames on 7 September 2016. That same day in New York, diplomats met in the United Nations Headquarters on the East River for the final round of negotiations on the New Urban Agenda, the outcome document of [Habitat 3](#) – the third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, which occurs every 20 years.

The two convenings focused on the future of cities, but the impossibility of being at both illustrated an ongoing question: to what degree, if any, does the design community of artists, architects, and planners interact with the foreign policy world of diplomats, policy wonks and development and security experts?

Or, to reverse the question, how many foreign policy practitioners visited Somerset House over the last three weeks of September?



in London, Fernando Romero laid out [plans for a new urban space on the US-Mexico border](#): "the first binational city to be built from zero," as the Mexican architect put it. Chinese and Cuban submissions, meanwhile, focused on new urban structures to expand access to both housing and technology in cities.

One city-focused panel, with an agenda as ambitious as that of the diplomats in New York, took on the question of how to "design great places for the future".

'The foreign policy world and the design community appear to be having parallel but disconnected conversations'

Indeed, the design community, not unlike the foreign policy world, has paid no small amount of attention to cities this year. Earlier in the year, at the [Venice Architecture Biennale](#), one of the more intriguing takes on the future of our cities was [offered by the British Pavilion](#).

Home Economics, as it was titled, provided five architectural propositions, designed around different windows of time: Hours, Days, Months, Years, Decades. "The way we live is changing radically through time," the curators of the exhibition noted, "we believe that British architecture is not responding to the challenges of modern living – life is changing; we must design for it."

Meanwhile in New York, an appreciation for the challenges and rapidly developing change in the urban space provided the imperative behind the New Urban Agenda negotiations.

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"By 2050 the world urban population is expected to nearly double, making urbanisation one of the 21st century's most transformative trends," reads the opening section of the agreed upon New Urban Agenda draft.

"We are still far from adequately addressing these and other existing and emerging challenges; and there is a need to take advantage of the opportunities of urbanisation as an engine of sustained and inclusive economic growth, social and cultural development, and environmental protection, and of its potential contributions to the achievement of transformative and sustainable development."

It is not only the language – virtually a Google Translate exercise from design-speak to diplo-speak – where there is a great deal of crossover, but in the agendas themselves.

'A temporal approach can bridge the foreign policy and design communities' conversations around security'

The concern with informal and accessible housing, particularly in the Global South, laid out by the Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning [Alejandro Aravena](#) in Venice, is to be found throughout the draft New Urban Agenda.

Diplomats and development experts increasingly recognise the importance of urban space, and



Late last month, the State Department and the Royal United Services Institute in London convened a group of foreign policy and design experts in the shadows of Whitehall to discuss this dynamic with a particular focus on security and cities.

A number of challenges surfaced, including the lack of a shared vocabulary, but chief among them was the question of scale, both geographically and temporally. In working on products, places and processes, designers might address everything from park benches to the locations of thoroughfares that give life to or strangle a community.

Meanwhile, security experts focus on everything from the communication devices of first responders to long-term questions of radicalisation. How to focus the conversation in a way that ensures the right people are at the table?

'The trend for sharing between and among cities has only grown stronger over the last decade'

One idea, which we will try at Habitat 3 in Quito next week, is to borrow the framework from the British Pavilion itself: Hours, Days, Months, Years, Decades. This temporal approach can provide a framework to bridge the foreign policy and design communities' conversations around, for example, security.

Let's take hours. Terrorist attacks, occurring in urban spaces with increasing frequency all over the world, require immediate action in dense and complex urban spaces. Leading architecture groups in the United Kingdom and the United States have helped develop design and policy around bollards to partially address this issue. The conversation should extend to the design of public spaces in an era of urban terrorism.

Or days. The extended period after Hurricane Sandy, during which Lower Manhattan had no power, is unlikely to be the last time a city loses power and services for days. The causes could be many, from climate change related extreme weather events to cyber-attacks that shut down electrical systems or data-related services. These are increasingly areas of concern for security and development experts, but it is in cities that mobility and security will need to be maintained in the course of such events.

Or, to look further out, decades. Economic, democratic and social inclusion, and to take in many ways their opposite, radicalisation, are not simply issues of political economy, ideology, or religion. In a city, they are also design issues.

The urban studies lab [Cluster](#) in Egypt has identified ways in which the design of Cairo influenced the revolution of January 2011, while Social Syntax, the science-based design firm in the United Kingdom, has done extensive work linking issues of housing and inclusivity to the London riots of August 2011.

The benefits of an ongoing conversation between these communities would be numerous, and extend far beyond dialogue. As the New Urban Agenda draft makes clear, community engagement and bottom-up approaches are integral to sustainable urbanisation.

'A core group of designers, diplomats and development experts should identify opportunities to build these bridges'

Yet it is more likely to be local designers and design councils than foreign ministries and



These organisations know how to navigate local, state and federal development processes, but their knowledge has rarely been brought to bear by international development agencies and institutions. Meanwhile, the trend for sharing between and among cities has only grown stronger over the last decade, and national governments are particularly well suited to encourage such sharing.

For urbanists and diplomats interested in the foreign policy implication of urbanisation, Habitat 3 is the largest event in decades, with upwards of 40,000 participants expected. Habitat 4, however, will not occur until 2036.

Looking forward, a core group of designers, diplomats and development experts – working with groups like Theatrum Mundi and LSE Cities – should identify opportunities to build these bridges at events that are normally the exclusive domain of one group or the other, including this year's C40 Summit in Mexico City and next year's United Nations General Assembly.

In an increasingly urbanised world that finds cities at the forefront of global issues such as climate change, terrorism and shared economic growth, solutions must not only be developed locally but shared globally. To do so, designers and diplomats must work more closely together.

Ian Klaus is senior adviser for global cities at the [US Department of State](#) and was deputy US negotiator for [Habitat 3](#). He holds a PhD from [Harvard University](#).

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