

# The Incomplete City Strikes Back

*Saskia Sassen toots her horn*

A social scientist is in a good position to analyse the changes taking place in the development of cities. Especially in times such as ours, where there is a marked contrast between the ageing built-environment of the western world and the instant urban entities sprouting up in Asia and elsewhere. Saskia Sassen has precipitated this information and is readdressing the question of what makes a city a city. Her basic rule is that a city must possess complexity and incompleteness. But when it comes to the new high-tech agglomerations, this definition does not accord.

CRISTINA GUADALUPE

“For centuries, the world economy has shaped the life of cities”, says social scientist Saskia Sassen in her book that gave birth to the concept: *The Global City*. But it is not only cities that are affected, since the world economy shapes the entire environment, even deserted areas. Actually, the massive process of urbanisation and its rural exodus is not so much due to an emphasis on cities; there is a growing interest in the earth’s resources, which is reflected in the massive purchase of empty land by emerging economies, corporations, and even hedge funds. In turn, thousands of people find themselves expelled from the land they own; for the most part, they are not rushing away, mesmerised by the city, contrary to popular mythology. Although the city might be the ultimate place for democracy, if complex and incomplete, there are hundreds of cities regularly being created nigh-on instantly from scratch.

Are those cities as we know them? What are cities today and what are their implications?

In each of the three major projects that comprise Sassen’s 20 years of research, she starts with a thesis that posits the unexpected and the counterintuitive, in order to cut through established ‘truths’. Her research and writing focus on globalisation (including its social, economic, and political dimensions), immigration, global cities (including terrorism), new technologies, and changes within the liberal state that result from current transnational conditions. In addition to her appointments at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, Sassen serves on several editorial boards and is an advisor to various international bodies. She is a Member of the Council on Foreign Relations and of the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Cities.

DAMN° met Saski Sassen at the annual Arquine architecture symposium in Mexico City in March, which revolved around the concept of Space and Public Space. We were impressed by her ideas and methods and couldn’t help but to speak with her-



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**DAMN°:** What do you call the incomplete versus the complete city?

**Saskia Sassen:** A real city is complex and incomplete. A city that is an Office Park is not a city. It is closed and elementary. What is not clear to me is whether a city like Songdo, a sort of high-tech city in South Korea (the most famous intelligent city we have so far), is actually a city or a tech space. And there are hundreds of such cities being built, often with far more tech aspects than the old cities. These new versions may gain some complex technologies, but are most likely closed cities, and the firm that sold them their big tech systems are running those systems centrally. That troubles me.

I believe we need to bring in technology. I am not against that at all, but everything is a curve, and if you bring in too much technology to handle everything, you de-urbanise the city.

**DAMN°:** What is the power of the incomplete city?

**SS:** That it can keep reinventing itself. As a microcosm of such reinventing, let's take a major building such as the parliament (the old Reichstag) in Germany. This is a building with a very dark history. But with some architectural and engineering innovations, including the famous transparent public access cupola, it is now considered the most democratic of buildings: all Parliamentary procedures can be witnessed from above by tourists, citizens, or whoever. It is also very environmentally sensitive. That is one microcosm of re-inventing and recoding the meaning of a building. Any of our old cities can have this type of work done. London has buildings that are 800-years-old and perfectly upgraded for office use, hotel use, etc. In Rome, many of the most beautiful foreign embassies inhabit old palaces that are hundreds and hundreds of years old. A good building can live for centuries and be a site for many different activities. When you pump it up with technology, when the whole city becomes a tech space, what happens? The rate of obsolescence of such buildings is more accelerated than that of well-built ones. If obsolete technology can bring a whole building down, then think of a high tech city - it could bring the whole city down.

**DAMN°:** You talk about forces that de-urbanise. What are those? What is this process of de-urbanisation?

**SS:** One of the major threats to cities are the forces that privatise urban space, that homogenize vast stretches of the city centre into one kind of high-end space for high-income people, with luxury shops, luxury restaurants, luxury state-of-the-art office buildings, etc. This type of homogeneity distorts the algorithm that

describes a complex, diverse city. Too much technology, the attempt to keep out the undesirable, the unknown, the different... none of this is good. So when Lagos became too much of a mess, the rich Nigerian government built a whole new city for itself and the elites - a new capital, Abuja - where everything is so expensive that that in itself is a mechanism for keeping out all kinds of people. Which is not great, I think. Contrarily, Lagos is an amazing place, with incredibly innovative people and artists living in the city and in the slums, which also contain home-based industries often run by the workers inhabiting those houses or shacks. The same kind of de-urbanising homogeneity is evident in Songdo. Add to that the new types of surveillance systems, especially in the highly developed world. For example, the US has over 10,000 buildings dedicated to the full time surveillance of people's actions and communications (ref: [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/2013210114231346318](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/2013210114231346318)). This is not about traffic speed or the monitoring of public spaces for crime; this is about gathering data on everyone living in US territory... just in case. That is potentially a very powerful de-urbanising force. But I also think that cities are places where you can contest that force.

**DAMN°:** When you say these "actively de-stabilise the meaning of the city", what do you mean?

**SS:** My starting point is that since the beginning of this global era, a lot of stable meanings - that of economy, national economy, a city, a family - are



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becoming unstable due to the new global forces shaping them. There was a time in the post World War II decades, whether you were in Europe, South America or North America, when there was a good sense of what a national economy or a family or a neighbourhood was; a sense of what the national government did for its citizens. It is not that all of that is completely gone, but its meaning is unstable. We need to actually find out what the government is doing in a specific country. In Sweden, for instance, the government is still doing a lot, but in the Netherlands, which has always had a reputation as a strong welfare state, it is doing far less than most people outside the Netherlands are aware of.

So I begin to ask, what kinds of unstable meanings do we have in cities? Can we simply look at a city in order to understand urbanisation, as we have



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done in the past? And my answer is NO. We need to find out what those old meanings stand for today. We again need to ask why there are so many people coming to cities. We also posed that question a hundred years ago, and five hundred years ago, and the answers were both specific and generic: the search for jobs, better lives, and adventure. In short, in the past it was the effect of the 'city lights', and that is still the case to some extent. Many politicians who do not know much about it keep saying it is solely because of this. Generally, that is what people assume. But it is not. The main reason is that people are being expelled from many rural areas due to the growth of mining, plantation of alternative industrial crops (such as palms for bio-fuels), underground water tapping by soda companies such as Nestle and Coca-Cola, and supplying food for the vast middle classes of China, the rich people in the Gulf states, and so on. Thus, when we invoke urbanisation we cannot stick to the old city lights paradigm. We must note that more and more rural households are being expelled from their land and that therefore going to the city is their only option. The former duality of city/rural is far less of a duality today - there are multiple connections, some good and some not so good. The two have always been linked, but now that connection is more violent, more radical.

DAMN°: Could you explain what land grabbing is?  
 SS: Land grabbing is not an official term. It has become the term used to describe the fact that since 2006, 200,020,000 hectares have been bought by foreign governments and firms - by many governments, not just the Chinese, as some commentators seem to think (ref: [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2013.760927](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2013.760927)). This is in many ways an old story: the empires of the English, Dutch, French, etc., all acquired land in one way or another. What is remarkable today is the sharp increase that has taken

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place since the financial crisis began to brew in 2006. As a social scientist, a sharp change in the curve is of interest: it signals that something is occurring. When something is quantifiable, I can draw a curve (very easy to do), and when I see the curve suddenly going up very fast, I am alerted. It's the same with the sharp growth in the urbanisation of the population in a very short period of time. What is this? It is not just the familiar migration to the cities in search of a better life. At this scale and speed, it is something new.

There is a lot of land speculation. Because land represents water, industrial crops, food crops, minerals. Concerning water, just consider that to make one litre of soda, like Coca-Cola, it takes 15 litres of water... partly due to the cleaning process involved and partly due to the fact that it has to boil forever. Coca-Cola and Nestle have killed entire underground water tables. In two states in India, the underground water table is gone and the local government now has to bring in trucks with water! And these are poor areas we are talking about, of course; the rich would not let it happen. The Indian government ejected Coca-Cola and said, "you are out of this country", because it has been disastrous. Nestle had a lawsuit filed against them in a community in Texas where they had also exhausted the local underground water table. Naturally, Nestle won and did not have to pay for the water they used or for draining the underground water table.

When financiers come to buy land, it is to speculate on its value. They are buying land as a liquid investment, not to become farmers. They see that it is valuable because land stands for water, for rare earth, for minerals, for industrial crops, and for food. They can't go wrong. So, we have the financialisation of commodities - not just the commodifying of food and minerals. When there is a bad crop, say, those who are selling the crop may lose a great deal, but the firms trading in financed commodities don't necessarily suffer a loss because there is then a scarcity of food and the prices go up! This is a very weird distortion. Finance can thrive on losses, no matter how destructive they might be to the farmers who are wiped out and the households who then need to pay much more for food. <

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