Asia's urban population will double between 2000 and 2030, adding 1.3 billion people. Asia's urban transformation has tremendous implications for the countries of the region and for the rest of the world. This growth is occurring as Asian societies have become more intertwined in global webs of trade, investment, and production, and as Asia's economies have steadily grown, producing more than a third of world gross domestic product. The urban expansion that has accompanied these changes and the increasing importance of cities as sites of corporate investment and production in the global era have given rise to urban development schemes of fantastic ambition. Governments and developers have proposed (and sometimes implemented) the construction of entire new towns designed for populations of between half a million and a million people in China, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, while scores more such projects with populations in the mere tens or hundreds of thousands are being planned around the world. These phenomena have caught the world's attention largely because of their global implications. Asia's economic growth, centered in its cities, has shifted the balance of global trade and investment. The region's voracious appetite for raw materials has contributed to the rapid inflation of prices for commodities like steel and oil. Of course, rapid industrialization, increasing consumerism, and the explosion of automobile ownership contribute to global warming. Less understood, but of profound long-term consequence, are the implications of urban change for Asian societies themselves. The physical form of cities—the networks of transport and communications, the streets, sidewalks, plazas, parks, buildings, and the spaces in between them—structure the environment in which social, economic, political, and cultural relations and activities take place. Spaces of congregation—be they squares, shopping malls, parks, or sidewalks—structure who interacts with whom, and on what terms. Networks of transportation shape who has access to what spaces and, therefore, what activities individuals are likely to engage in, what economic opportunities will be available to them, and with whom they are likely to interact. Both corporate landscapes of office towers and malls and public monuments and buildings play symbolic roles in representing national identities, the role of the state in society, and the meaning of national citizenship.

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The dramatic changes witnessed in Asian cities are a product of changes in politics and social relations in the global era that have created new kinds of interests and new sources of power to shape urban development. For those interested in the way Asian societies are changing and what implications this has for the rest of the world, understanding the issues confronting Asia's cities is critical. How is urbanization in the global era, and its associated physical and social transformations, reshaping life for people in the region? How is this change experienced by people from different walks of life? What does this mean for the social, political, cultural, and economic transformations these societies are experiencing?

Today, 13 of the 20 tallest buildings are in Asia, and all but two were built in the last 12 years. These phenomena have caught the world's attention largely because of their global implications. Asia's economic growth, centered in its cities, has shifted the balance of global trade and investment. The region's voracious appetite for raw materials has contributed to the rapid inflation of prices for commodities like steel and oil. Of course, rapid industrialization, increasing consumerism, and the explosion of automobile ownership contribute to global warming. Less understood, but of profound long-term consequence, are the implications of urban change for Asian societies themselves. The physical form of cities—the networks of transport and communications, the streets, sidewalks, plazas, parks, buildings, and the spaces in between them—structure the environment in which social, economic, political, and cultural relations and activities take place. Spaces of congregation—be they squares, shopping malls, parks, or sidewalks—structure who interacts with whom, and on what terms. Networks of transportation shape who has access to what spaces and, therefore, what activities individuals are likely to engage in, what economic opportunities will be available to them, and with whom they are likely to interact. Both corporate landscapes of office towers and malls and public monuments and buildings play symbolic roles in representing national identities, the role of the state in society, and the meaning of national citizenship.

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State
The current spate of urban development projects in Asia has some parallels to the post-World War II period, when countries around the world, many emerging from colonial rule, undertook massive urban development and infrastructure initiatives. Yet the role of the state constitutes a critical difference between contemporary projects and these earlier efforts. The postwar projects, which were inspired by the ideas of modernization theory and fueled by multilateral and bilateral aid and lending, were largely state-driven efforts at nation-building...
and political consolidation. One of the iconic projects of this period was Chandigarh, the new capital of the Indian Punjab. Conceived by the French modernist architect Le Corbusier, the city’s design represented an effort to signify the country’s future as a modern, economically advanced nation. The plan for the city focused on creating new kinds of neighborhoods designed to encourage civic-mindedness in the population, projecting an image of orderliness into the transportation network and patterns of land use, and projecting a progressive and powerful image for the nascent Indian state through the iconic design of major public buildings.

In contrast, most contemporary urban development projects exhibit the emergence of a more entrepreneurial approach to governing and represent an effort to stimulate global investment by tapping into the financial and technological capacity of the corporate sector. The projects that result are more much commercial in nature and are premised on a view that, with globalization, state and corporate actors have come to share an interest in a globalization-led strategy of economic development. A number of forces have led to this shift. First, in the global context of heightened competition for investment and the new ethos of fiscal austerity this has engendered, lavish public expenditures within the city, “often considered to be the essence of local and national government use of state propriety, have been largely abandoned in favor of more market-led approaches to the production of urban space, and issues of citizenship.

Second, as labor emerges as a global commodity, governments have come to view the attraction of investment, the attraction and retention of skilled workers, and, increasingly, the export of labor and the creation of remittances within the city, as key elements of national economic agendas. For three closely related areas of investigation transformations in urban politics and the role of the state in urban development, changes in the production of urban space, and issues of citizenship and political upheaval in cities. The theme year will include a lecture series that will engage leading contributors in debate on urban issues in India. The theme year will also feature a film series, a graduate student panel, a competitive funding program for graduate students to conduct field research in India during the summer of 2009, a fall semester graduate seminar course on Indian urban issues, and a year-end conference that will explore in greater depth some of the themes identified during the year. During the fall semester of 2009, Ravi Sundaram will be CAS’s Visiting Scholar-in-Residence. He is a Fellow at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi and a founding member of Sarai, one of the most influential centers for the study of urban issues in India.
In Urban Asia

Who has access to what kinds of spaces, and under what terms and conditions are they allowed to utilize these spaces?

In the Philippines, for example, the primary market for most major developments is overseas contract workers and Filipinos living abroad. Developers consequently focus on their sales efforts on junkets overseas and opening sales offices in Hong Kong, Dubai, New York, and other major cities and countries. They market their projects as self-contained enclaves of convenience, consumerism, and modernity, useless from the congestion and chaos of the rest of the city. There is no space here for those of more modest income unless government regulations or pressure from neighboring communities necessitate the provision of affordable housing or public space. Where these developments are not gated, they are often deliberately cut off from the street grid of the surrounding city in order to maintain an exclusive character. They often maintain their own security force. Their streets, parks, and public spaces are usually carefully regulated to prevent the incursion of street vendors, beggars, and other "undesirables.

There are other manifestations of increasing social separation and contestation over the use of city spaces with Asia’s globalization. Private universities in Metro Manila employ state-of-the-art security facilities to control access to campuses. In one infamous incident in Delhi, a young man from a nearby low-income housing project was beaten to death by a mob in a park in a wealthy community due to suspicions that he had defecated on the grounds. To reiterate, most of the most ambitious development proposals are but a gimmick in a developer’s eye, and the transformation of Asian cities into an archipelago of enclaves of the wealthy surrounded by a sea of poverty is far from complete. Nonetheless, the changes that have occurred and, indeed, the very appeal of the vision that these new city projects represent raise a host of questions about contemporary change in these societies. What does this vision mean for relations between social classes? How do changes in the way cities are developing redefine who has access to well-maintained and well-planned spaces like parks, plazas, and streets? Is there increasing separation between the wealthy and the others in the city? What does this mean for social, cultural, and political life, and for who is able to access economic opportunity?

Citizenship

At the heart of the issues of state and space outlined above is the question of citizenship. Who has access to what kinds of spaces and under what conditions are they allowed to utilize these spaces? Who has access to the power to shape urban development, and toward what objectives do they use that power? Urban citizenship has recently become a central issue of debate in the social sciences, most notably in anthropology. Anthropologists James Holston, Arjun Appadurai, and Aihwa Ong, among others, have argued that globalization fosters cross-national economic and cultural linkages among an urban, globalized elite of highly educated professionals. They contend that this class has become economically advantageous and influential in national and local politics as its centrality to globalization-led economic growth has become apparent. In the urban development, the political economy of urban planning and architecture have increasingly being employed to differentiate access to social opportunity. In this view, the development of new cities, export-processing zones, and other urban initiatives is part of a larger trend in which states are moving away from the distribution of their resources and power based on goals of equity and national economic growth, and toward their distribution based on perceived economic productivity. In other words, the rights and privileges of citizenship are increasingly distributed based on the wealth and affluence of particular local and national elites.

By bringing together some of the most thoughtful scholars and practitioners of urban development in India during our theme year (see page 2 inset), we hope to contribute to debates that are ongoing in the streets, shops, and dwellings of Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata, and Bangalore. We hope that these events will create new understanding at the University of Michigan and beyond of the issues facing Indian cities and will lead to new agendas of research and action and new partnerships between scholars and practitioners of urban planning, policy, design, and political and social mobilization.