



# Rethinking, Reimagining, Redesigning Global Urbanization:

## The Hard Questions for Urban Stakeholders

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# New Thinking Toward True Transformation

**The future is now.** And if we are smart, we will see the urgent mandate to let go of the past and imagine possibilities that don't yet exist. As we travel the globe, observing and experiencing urban life, we are always on the lookout for bold, sustainable urban transformation. While global urbanization presents visible and invisible challenges and opportunities, we believe the real pathway to embracing our urban future is to get to the heart of the big issues affecting people's lives—to go from incremental to exponential solutions. It begins by asking the hard questions that we often avoid, thinking they are too difficult to answer. The natural tendency is to jump to quick fixes to address symptoms as opposed to first formulating the hard questions that underlie a more complex set of interrelated issues of urbanization.

To begin the urgent task of rethinking, reimagining, and redesigning urbanization, this brief explores some key steps that stakeholders involved in urban spaces today and in the future should consider.

We explore the subject of “Hard Questions” as the means to provoke different actions. In particular with cities as the epicenters of urbanization, city leaders, urban practitioners, infrastructure operators, investors, academicians and civic leaders are part of the multidisciplinary team that should be convened in a new approach based on “question storming” sessions to uncover the hard questions that will ultimately lead to transformational changes.

Recognizing the myriad challenges of urbanization and multifaceted interrelated layers of urban dynamics, we focus on only four areas—Infrastructure, Equity and Engagement, Investments in Technology & Talent and Identity and Urban Leadership—to illustrate how exploring hard questions will move us toward more vibrant and resilient cities, safer and more livable urban communities. Indeed, we encourage every reader to rethink and reimagine a very different future that all of us want to visit.

Critical to true transformation that is fueled by bold actions, we present examples of some of the questions based on conversations with city and industry leaders, a diverse array of urbanites that we have met across the globe in recent years. It is just a beginning, meant to instigate more hard questions and provoke new thinking.





# Are We Paying Attention?

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do.”

– Mark Twain

# Are We Paying Attention?

By 2050 the global population is projected to reach approximately 10 billion. According to the United Nations, 8.5 billion or 66% of the world's population will be urban—up from 30% in 1950. The opportunity to embrace this growth and the demands of this massive change can only be realized through the integration of urban systems—systems that create true engagement and different actions among all stakeholders. Rethinking, reimagining and redesigning the role of cities is a global imperative which demands a sense of urgency!

As Carlo Ratti, founder of the MIT, Senseable City Lab, explains,

***“Today cities occupy only 2% of the world’s surface, but they host up to 50% of the world’s population, are responsible for 75% of global energy consumption and 80% of CO2 emissions. Hence, if we made our cities just a little more efficient, we could have a major global impact.”***

Do we have the collective will to tackle the demands and harness the opportunities of urbanization? Can we forge a shared vision as a global community to create equity? Can we secure and support compassionate leadership to create a sustainable future?





# Introduction

“You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.”

– Christopher Columbus

# Introduction to Opportunities Abound

Urbanization is one of the planet's greatest challenges. It is also ripe with the fruits of opportunity which, if harvested, can create a more equitable, sustainable world for all. Because cities are the epicenters for reimagined urban life, our focus for transformed urbanization begins with cities.

Can we reimagine cities – large and small – and adopt the principles of reinvention, to let go of the past, to imagine possibilities, and redefine new paradigms for engagement that don't yet exist and create new livable urban spaces?

Can we move beyond the status quo to a new set of ground rules that challenge everyone to think differently, to ask the hard questions which ultimately produce transformative outcomes for cities?



**Reimagine**



**Transformation**

Our intention is to underscore new ideas, to prompt new insights that ultimately catalyze bold, urgent actions. We acknowledge the complexity of often disjointed layers of physical, social and digital infrastructures that govern cities, as well as the barriers and institutional inertia to cultural change. We have experienced, firsthand, the prevalence of dysfunctions—tradition-bound thinking, inexperienced and incompetent leadership, acceptance of corrupt and arrogant behaviors—in many cities around the world. We acknowledge that these dysfunctions make it difficult to create collaborations that effect real transformation. And yet we realize that old patterns will have to evolve and in some cases be completely disrupted; we see the opportunity for authentic, enduring change.

# Our Certain Mission, Always with an Uncertain Path

Our goal here is two-fold: **First** to inform and inspire the need for new thinking by all urban stakeholders about the future of cities.

**Second**, as we ourselves are compelled to think anew, even more, we must think bigger on behalf of cities, asking urban leaders and the full community of stakeholders to envision a new direction and act with expediency.

We believe that the pace of technological and societal change is moving so fast that the essence of what a city is today will not work going forward. We seek to encourage you to think differently; to let go of the past mental models and aged assumptions of a different time and boldly reimagine the future.

Our personal and professional experiences living in and/or working with cities in several countries around the world continues to strengthen our sense of urgency—from the climate crisis to population and demographic shifts to the lack of adequate infrastructure--now is the time for bold actions to address the challenges we face.

Over the past 15 years we have seen many “smart city” or “intelligent city” terms used to characterize the solutions that proliferate around the globe—all with the goal of addressing the vexing urban crisis facing our planet. In fact, the examples of innovative solutions in cities are encouraging—from infrastructure to inclusion, from waste management to water management, from energy to education, from the built environment to equity.

And yet, the future is fraught with changes; changes that none of us can keep up with.

The speed of population growth and the climate crisis are just two of the overarching challenges affecting all urban spaces. Consider infrastructures: inadequate energy, water, food, waste, transport and data. Consider the social challenges: the lack of access to education, jobs and training, the lack of affordable housing and health care, the lack of cultural understanding and inclusion, social upheaval and enduring poverty. Consider the governance and leadership challenges: the lack of trust between government and the private sector, pervasive corruption, dysfunctional governance, the lack of vision and thoughtful long term investment decisions...and the list goes on.

The pace and complexity of urbanization, as well as the impending impact on current and future generations, compels us to be part of the “question storming” process as a key step to address important global challenges. It is clear that a status quo and business-as-usual approach may delay and, in some cases, accelerate the difficult problems stemming from urbanization. As a result, we will fail to capitalize on the opportunities.

But, instead of quickly proposing solutions to address the myriad challenges in cities as is often the case, we believe the first step should be to take a fresh



## Equipping us to Find New Solutions

look at the questions viewed through the prism that considers both the long and the short term. Before jumping to solutions, the big and hard questions must be asked...only then, will the real opportunities ahead in the next 10, 20, 30 years emerge. Thus, we believe now is the time to push for new exponential and pragmatic thinking that leads to groundbreaking change that can rebuild societies, instead of linear thinking that only nets incremental change.

While we have seen cities around the globe—from Medellin to Malaga, from Helsinki to Singapore—create real transformation, some of these examples pale in comparison to the scale and scope of problems that most of the world's cities, especially the emerging mega-cities face.

We acknowledge the temptation to replicate examples from other cities — every city, indeed every local government, has a different set of challenges and local preconditions. What is a best practice from one city could be the worst practice for another city. We believe that new thinking based on exploring hard questions in a specific local context is urgently needed to catalyze actions.

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This unique “question storming” process must be inclusive and holistic with participation of the full ecosystem of a community—city leaders, infrastructure companies for-profit and non-profit leaders, regulators and policymakers, universities, citizens, residents—truly all stakeholders, to rethink, reimagine and redesign urban spaces and take aggressive action to meet the future.

None of us, alone, can keep up with the speed of global change, yet all of us share a sense of urgency to act. Our intention is to inspire your bigger, bolder actions based on the big questions, to make a difference toward a more livable, sustainable world. We believe that questions that are linear in nature will not catapult our thinking and imagination toward solutions for urbanization.





The Hard and Important Questions:

# What will it take to transform?

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.”

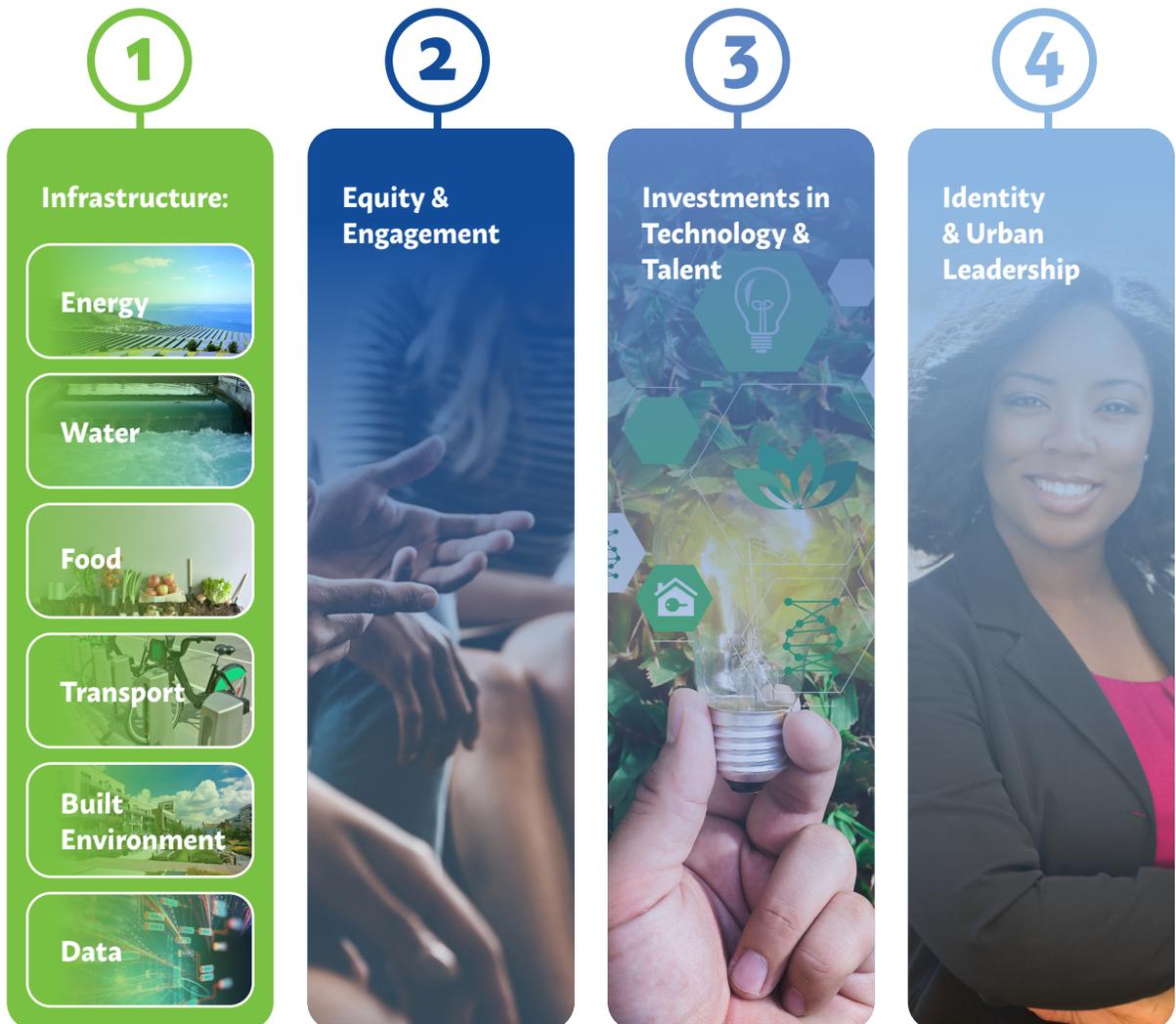
– John Quincy Adams

## The Hard and Important Questions:

# What will it take to transform?

Only with sufficient political will, vision, and creativity will we create livable, prosperous cities. Change will require public and private sectors at all levels to cooperate, invest at scale, share ideas, share best practices, and plan for the long term. In addition, the entire ecosystem in every urban center—nonprofits, educational institutions and civic organizations—will play a fundamental role in securing a brighter future in cities.

To illustrate the power of “question storming”, we focus on four critical areas that we believe are essential to urban transformation:





# Question Everything

“Innovators that change the world ask questions that disrupt the world.”

– Hal Gregersen

# Question Everything

To truly reimagine global urbanization, we believe that we must give space and time to ask questions. By asking the difficult questions—the questions that expose our biases, the questions that bring our beliefs to the surface—only then will we hear and formulate the right questions that unlock solutions no one else has discovered.

To accelerate the transformation of cities and other urban spaces around the world, it is time to implement this “question storming” process which will generate the hard, exponential questions to lay the foundations for bold solutions to global urbanization.

In the following we describe an example of how this can be applied.



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# The “Question Storming” Process

This question storming process of delving into the hard, difficult and inconvenient questions should ultimately result in an action agenda. Consider a few examples of questions we have uncovered through conversations with urban stakeholders around the world.

## 1 Complex Challenges:

If the biggest problems in our cities are subtle, complex, even invisible—climate change, water, air, food, energy, transport and data—how do we create a greater awareness of the challenges and take new actions to solve them?

## 2 Equity & Engagement:

If a city is deemed smart or intelligent, is it truly a smart city when it has the latest advanced technologies alongside impoverished communities, lacking inclusion and equity? How do we build compassionate cities?

## 3 Identity & Urban Leadership:

How do we motivate urban leaders to create a vision for their future—truly collaborative, receptive to new technologies and instilled with the courage to transform? How do we translate wealth into well-being?

## 4 Investments in Technology & Talent:

If cities need to make smart investments in technology and talent to thrive, how do we transform the process for procurement and enable faster, better informed decisions?

## 5 Unsolved Problems:

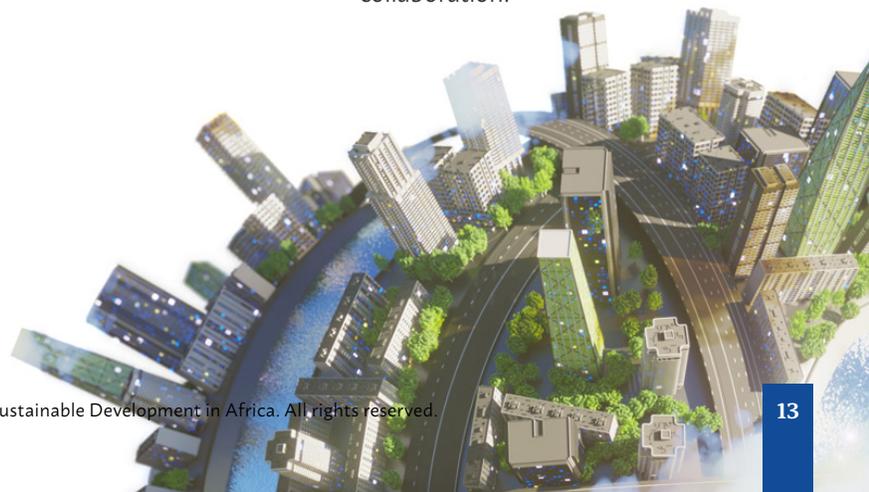
What are the unsolved problems to accelerate electrifying the world? To develop frameworks for economic prosperity, safety, security and a truly livable world?

## 6 Future Projections:

How do we create awareness and action around the interdependencies in our world? How do we show the relationships between personal health and a healthy planet? Between competitiveness and collaboration?

## 7 Interdependencies:

What if our projections about urbanization are wrong? What different actions do we take to survive and thrive?



A hand is visible on the left side of the page, pointing towards the center. The background features a faint, stylized globe with a cityscape overlay, showing various buildings and structures. The overall theme is urban development and sustainability.

## Towards a Shared Urban Future

In the quest to uncover the hard questions, it is paramount to broaden this exploration and question storming through various platforms with many across the globe – to a diverse array of urban stakeholders – including city leaders, urban practitioners, to infrastructure operators and investors, from civic leaders to corporate boards, to academia, across all demographics.

We believe that only the right questions, no matter how hard and difficult, will allow us to rethink, reimagine, and redesign our future. Our collective intelligence must direct our mission to enable faster and better informed decisions that support authentic transformation in our urban spaces - transformation that moves us to safer, sustainable, more livable environments across the planet.

## Supporting Organizations

# PersonalCities

Personal Cities was created to build relationships. We help cities and companies build trust toward an engagement that shapes a city's future by fostering actions that define the quality of ideas, the benefits of innovation and the opportunities for all who live, work, play and visit the city.

[www.PersonalCities.org](http://www.PersonalCities.org)



**CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

The Center for Sustainable Development in Africa (CSDA) works to advance sustainable development practices across Africa through building capacity for creating innovative solutions, strengthening entrepreneurial spirit and fostering effective leadership at all levels of society. Founded in 2012, CSDA is a United States based nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization located in Washington DC.

[www.csdafr.org](http://www.csdafr.org)



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# About the Authors



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Ms. Baer is a champion of creative collaboration between the public and private sectors. Currently Ms. Baer serves as President of Personal Cities, a smart city company focused on city branding and identity, social inclusion and equity, and the acceleration of digital technology investments. She has advised a number of cities in the US and Europe and has consulted to CityZenith, UrbanLeap, Citibeats and Aalto Consultores. She is a Global Ambassador for the Edison Electric Institute, a member of Denton's Smart Cities & Communities Think Tank and a member of the Women's Business Collaborative Advisory Board and Leaders Council. She serves on the board of multiple professional and civic organizations.

She has held marketing leadership roles with ATT, Discovery Chanel, Nextel/Sprint, Ridge Global, Smart Cities Council, CIVIQ Smartscales and Bloomberg Government. Miss Baer is a respected speaker and moderator, and has spoken at smart city, energy, infrastructure, sustainability and digital signage conferences in the US, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. She holds BA, MBA degrees and a global advanced management certification from Georgetown University. Me Baer has lived and worked across Europe and currently resides in Washington DC.

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Dr. Jones is a recognized thought leader and practitioner in global energy systems, and a leading visionary on smart cities. Dr. Jones is Co-Founder and Board Member of the Center for Sustainable Development in Africa, a US-based philanthropy. He has authored numerous publications and speaks often at events and conferences around the globe. Dr. Jones is Vice President for International Programs at the Edison Electric Institute. He serves on the advisory council of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, USA, and is affiliated with academic institutions and think tanks including: Monash University, Australia; Center for Strategic and International Studies; and Dentons Smart Cities & Communities Think Tank. He has received numerous awards for leadership and contribution in the field of renewable energy, and holds several patents for technologies that enhance situational awareness of energy system operators. He was North America Vice President for Utility Innovation & Infrastructure Resilience at Alstom Grid Inc, and prior worked on several projects for ABB in Sweden, and was a visiting scientist at Électricité de France. Dr. Jones received his MSc, Licentiate and Ph.D. degrees in Electrical Engineering from the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden.

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