

Futures Fair⁰⁹

SOCIETY AND STIMULUS

Population: Movements and Limitations

19/05/09

'MORE THAN MERE CARBON EATERS.'



Before the speakers of the Futures Fair 09 part two seminar on Population took centre stage, the audience were invited to engage in a set of five-minute conversations and reflect on a series of wide ranging provocations rooted in global population growth, local and international migration, their effect on the environment, both macro and micro and impacts on quality of life.

How do rapidly increasing communities cope? Is there really such a thing as overpopulation? During this *Futures Links* "speed dating" session, Chris Fay of CF Moller Architects asked, "Is the housing crisis just a myth?" What about the abandoned housing in our northern cities? We

could only wait in anticipation to hear if the speakers had the answers.

Introducing the seminar, David Fisk of Imperial College compared architects and urban planners with the Victorians. He said "[The Victorians] knew sex was an issue, but they didn't have a social language to talk about it." Fisk claimed that professionals in policy and urban design have yet to find a common language with which to articulate the subject. Speaking from very different positions, Roger Martin of the Optimum Population Trust, Austin Williams of the Futures Cities Project and Alasdair Murray of political think-tank- Centre Forum, began to break down this view as they articulated their speculations on the future of population management, human movements, urban experience and the limitations of growth.

It has been forecasted that by 2029, the number of one-person households will have risen from 6.5 million to almost 10.5 million. This troubling estimation is one of the many future issues raised with regards to population shifts in the UK over the next 20 years. Speaking in favour of the two-child policy, Roger Martin stated that we need to balance migration and put the breaks on our growth aspirations in order to stabilise climate change and minimise the future strain on our resources. Stirring up the debate, Williams rejected this population policy outright as he claimed that growth should not be seen as a problem. He called for a more balanced argument, asking us to look back 40 years when the population level in London was similar to the number of inhabitants in the city today and how it was organically managed then.

Even if data is showing global population increase, with predictions of an influx of 700,000 people in London in the next ten years, Williams

said this doesn't automatically equate to negative impacts on society. He said people are not "simply carbon excreters" – on the contrary, there is power in numbers as people are potentially creative agents.

Alasdair Murray offered an alternative to the population policy with the theory that we can lower the birth rate through birth and education. A substantial area of immigration influx is from international students. He said that the only sure way of lowering the global birth rate is through education and development, as many graduates continue to live in and benefit the area where they studied. The UK has repeatedly benefitted from such movements.

It was broadly felt that reactionary buzzwords such as 'decline' 'crisis' and 'problem' ought to be replaced with a progressive vocabulary – one thing all the speakers agreed on was the need for a different kind of language to articulate the 'issues' (NB: not problems) concerning population and climate change, as we cannot assume that a humanity will not find solutions to overcome the world's ever-decreasing resources. After all, as Williams positively notes, "new life is a wellspring of potential creativity", as architecture and urban design can be seen as progressive and innovative."

The group discussion picked up on the issues surrounding place making and the futility of a single policy governing numbers and nodal points. The experience and the vibrancy of towns and cities was based on encounter, the more potential for it the better it seemed. Infrastructure was deemed critical to the management of numbers. An effective system was needed so that people had the freedom to choose where to be and where to seek services.

Reflecting on Chris Fay's earlier question during *Futures Links*– by the definitions of the discussion- there is no housing *crisis*- it is a myth, population growth with its greater sources of potential human-centred remedies and innovation- can solve the issues that emerge from growth itself. If growth is inevitable by 2029 we need to design for it!

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