

# Inequality and urban growth

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This year London's population overtook its historical high of 8.6 million reached at the outset of the Second World War, bucking the trend of many European and North American cities, which have experienced only slight, or even negative, growth. Compared to other global cities, London is inching forward, with only nine new residents per hour, compared to double that number in São Paulo and over 70 in Delhi, Kinshasa and Dhaka. Nonetheless, London will accommodate a million more people by 2030.

These snapshots reflect deep differences in patterns of urban growth and change across the globe, often masked by the crude statistic that the world is now more urban than rural.

Today Europe and South and North America are the most urbanised of the five continents, with 73%, 83% and 82% of people respectively living in cities, towns and other urban settlements. Africa stands at around 40% and Asia at 48%: both of these regions are set to experience exponential growth in the coming decades, thanks to increased birth rates and migration.

While there are stark differences in patterns of urban growth across the globe, there are equally stark differences in the distribution patterns of inequality. All cities display some level of inequality. Some are more pronounced than others, depending on their national and regional contexts, and the level of economic development and informalisation. What we are observing today, especially in cities of the developing world, is that social inequality is becoming increasingly spatialised.

Designers, developers, investors and policy makers are faced with increasingly tough choices as to how to intervene within changing urban physical and social landscapes. How do you maintain the DNA of the city when it undergoes profound transformations? Who is the city for? How do you reconcile public and private interests? Who pays and who gains? The city planners of London, Paris, Barcelona, Hamburg and New York are grappling with the same questions as the urban leaders of African, Latin American and many Asian cities, even though the levels of deprivation and requirements for social infrastructure are of a different order of magnitude.

Many urban projects of recent decades have contributed to a physical reinforcement of inequality. Gated communities and enclaves proliferate. They cast differences in stone or concrete, not for a few undesirable outcasts, but for generations of new urban dwellers who flock to the city in search of jobs and opportunities. A key question for policy makers is what role, if any, does the design of the physical environment play in exacerbating or alleviating inequality?



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Gated wealth in Paris

In many African and Latin American cities, inequality is indeed a stark reality. Despite recent improvements, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, for example, still top the Gini index charts, which measure inequality. In fact, inequality in these cities is nearly twice that of London or Berlin, although it remains less extreme than some African cities like Johannesburg and Lagos, or indeed other Latin American cities like Mexico City and Santiago, or the highly planned Brazilian capital of Brasília.

London, for example, has average income levels four times higher than Rio de Janeiro. Yet, it has a marked intra-urban distribution of inequality. The most deprived neighbourhoods are concentrated in the east and south, with more affluent residents concentrated in west London and the periphery of the city (the suburbs on the edge of the Green Belt). In Paris, by contrast, social deprivation is concentrated at the northern edges of the city, and among poorly serviced, predominantly migrant communities living in 1970s' block typologies in the suburban *banlieues* beyond the *périphérique* motorway.

The reality is that in many parts of the world urbanisation has become more spatially fragmented, less environmentally responsive and more socially divisive. Adaptable and porous urban design, coupled with social mix and density, will not solve social inequality on its own. But they will go a long way in mitigating the

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negative impacts of exclusionary design and planning. By developing a more open form of urbanism that recognises how the spatial and the social are inextricably linked, cities could help provide solutions, not just exacerbate problems.

This text draws from research carried out by LSE Cities, a research centre which Professor Burdett directs at the LSE. Visit <https://lsecities.net/>

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