



KOMM
IN DIE
GÄNGE

Photo: Franziska Holz

tags urbanization, demographic change, climate change, gentrification, energy, grassroots politics

The Urban Revolution



Niels Boeing

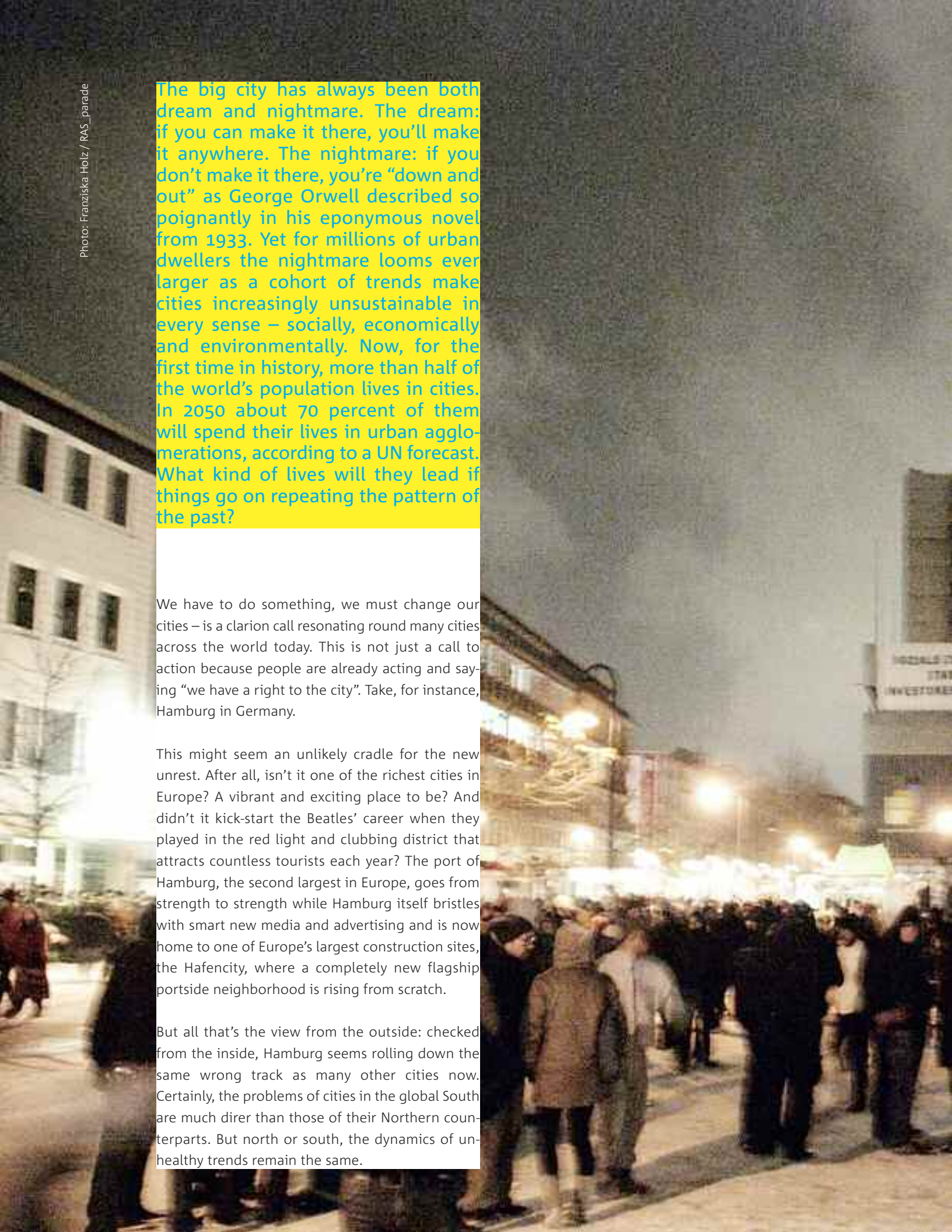
Niels Boeing is a journalist in Hamburg. Travels through Asia and Africa spawned his interest in globalization but also convinced him that every change for the better has to start locally. He is a member of the group “LOMU – local organized multitude” (www.lomu.net) that organises social experiments in public space and also active in Hamburg’s network “Recht auf Stadt” (www.rechtaufstadt.net). He fully agrees with John Holloway that the new challenge is to “change the world without taking power”.

The big city has always been both dream and nightmare. The dream: if you can make it there, you'll make it anywhere. The nightmare: if you don't make it there, you're "down and out" as George Orwell described so poignantly in his eponymous novel from 1933. Yet for millions of urban dwellers the nightmare looms ever larger as a cohort of trends make cities increasingly unsustainable in every sense – socially, economically and environmentally. Now, for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population lives in cities. In 2050 about 70 percent of them will spend their lives in urban agglomerations, according to a UN forecast. What kind of lives will they lead if things go on repeating the pattern of the past?

We have to do something, we must change our cities – is a clarion call resonating round many cities across the world today. This is not just a call to action because people are already acting and saying "we have a right to the city". Take, for instance, Hamburg in Germany.

This might seem an unlikely cradle for the new unrest. After all, isn't it one of the richest cities in Europe? A vibrant and exciting place to be? And didn't it kick-start the Beatles' career when they played in the red light and clubbing district that attracts countless tourists each year? The port of Hamburg, the second largest in Europe, goes from strength to strength while Hamburg itself bristles with smart new media and advertising and is now home to one of Europe's largest construction sites, the Hafencity, where a completely new flagship portside neighborhood is rising from scratch.

But all that's the view from the outside: checked from the inside, Hamburg seems rolling down the same wrong track as many other cities now. Certainly, the problems of cities in the global South are much direr than those of their Northern counterparts. But north or south, the dynamics of unhealthy trends remain the same.



The issues: urban sell-out and the energy crisis

Let's start with housing. In the past 17 years public housing in Hamburg has dropped by over 50% (from around 210,000 units to just over 100,000). At the same time rents have rocketed, especially in former working-class or derelict inner city areas. And the number of one-person households has shot up dramatically – one of the key demographic changes in industrialized countries in the past decades which puts further pressure on rents as living space becomes in increasingly short supply.

The effects of such trends are referred to as “gentrification”, a term coined by the British sociologist Ruth Glass in the early 1960s. Gentrification means a process in which people are forced out of their neighborhoods by a bullish unregulated real estate market and replaced by “gentry”, a term which used to mean the lesser landed English nobility but which in this context refers to the young urban professionals who can afford to pay the prohibitive rents.

Originally endemic to New York and London, gentrification has long since spread to other cities around the world. But in the past 15 years something fundamental has changed as not only the enterprise sector but cities too start to feel the heat from globalization and join the competition for investors and so-called “high potentials”. How do you make your mark on the global playing field? By developing your city and making it irresistible for investors and the well-to-do. As Hamburg has done.

Hamburg sold off large swathes of urban real estate to the highest bidder in a move to build more shiny office towers and luxury apartment blocks, printing building licenses for private owners with similar intentions, particularly in disadvantaged inner city areas. The results were self-evident as city-center rents rose to astronomical new levels.

Cities are notorious energy-guzzlers and growing cities have an even greater need for power. So it's not surprising that “boomtown Hamburg” – as one German magazine put it in 2006 – also turned to tackle its energy supply problem. Yet the self-styled “Growing City” opted for fossil fuel energy at a time when it was already apparent that fossil



Photo: Arne Bratenstein / RAS_parade_soziale_stadt

fuels – with their high CO₂ emissions – were no reasonable future option for a world facing climate change. Even so, plans for a major new coal-fired plant were still announced.

For greater efficiency it was planned to use the excess heat from operations for district heating and a pipeline through two inner city districts was commissioned that cut a public park in two. New housing was also planned for densification of existing residential areas in a move that did nothing to mitigate the problem of soaring rents. At this point, when existing urban green space is further diminished and renewable energy sources are



Photo: Theo Bruns

disregarded out of hand, the energy problem comes full circle and touches on both the housing issue and the climate change problem.

The idea: a right to the city

For a while these developments went largely unchallenged. There were signs of patchy disgruntlement as various citizens' groups started to take action in their neighborhoods against various major projects. Yet this did not result in a movement in that captured public attention. Last year, however, things changed.

In April 2009 a memo of secret negotiations between local politicians and an investor was leaked that revealed plans to demolish period houses in a poor neighborhood near the Hamburg port to make way for yet another apartment block. This was not just any old neighborhood but one with a



Photo: Martin Heger / RAS_parade_komm_in_die_gänge

long history of urban resistance. And its residents reacted by making the plans public and mobilizing protest. Soon the area was fluttering with yellow "NO BNQ" pennants (BNQ is the acronym of the investment project).

In June various initiatives from across the city organized a joint demonstration that brought 1,500 people onto the streets. That was only the beginning. One week later they convened in the newly founded "Centro Sociale", a social cooperative that gives space for non-commercial neighborhood activities (in notably short supply in Hamburg), under the banner of "Recht auf Stadt" – a right to the city.

“A right to the city” is a concept developed by the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre in the late 1960s when he formulated his critique of post-war urbanism, its ubiquitous consumerism, and the mutation of the public spaces of streets into a “series of shop windows”. Lefebvre saw urbanization as an inexorable, inevitable process which could be turned into something truly liberating by granting the “right to the city” to all its denizens. By this Lefebvre meant the right to appropriation, access, difference and centrality. Urban elites can exercise such rights effortlessly as they are associated with a level of disposable money which remains beyond the reach of the majority of people. Should such a state of affairs be tolerated?



Photo: Theo Bruns / RAS_parade



Photo: Theo Bruns

Responses: taking action

The idea of a right to the city caught on with the grassroots initiatives. Two months later it finally emerged into the public eye. On a fine summer's day in late August, some 200 artists and activists took the right to access into their own hands by occupying the last remaining buildings in the “Gängeviertel”, Hamburg’s 19th century working class district close to the city center. This city property – vacant for years and in a seriously dilapidated condition – had been sold to a Dutch investor and was scheduled for demolition to make way for the standard brand of up-market architecture.

The activists opened a giant art exhibition in the buildings and demanded that the city council withdraw from the sell-out. Famous personalities from Hamburg’s culture and art scene came in support of the protest squat which caused quite a stir in the

city’s press. Significantly enough, no police squads were sent in to vacate the buildings as had infamously happened in the wave of squatting in the 1980s.

This was because the public were largely sympathetic to the artist-squatters’ stance since the fundamental question behind the squatting – is this city on the right track? – made solid sense. People were indeed asking themselves which was preferable – a city of car parks and ever more glitz or a city of affordable urban spaces. Without the economic crisis, general public reaction might have been different, but the recession had deeply unsettled many people. This is now not the best time for urban visions of yesterday that provide no satisfying solutions for the sustainable city of tomorrow.



Photo: Tobias Boeing / Gentropoly

Since that time much has happened in Hamburg. 25 initiatives have set up the "Recht auf Stadt" network that spans not just various city neighborhoods but a variety of social environments well from anarchist to working and middle class. This is something distinctly new which cannot be dismissed as merely a case of "the usual suspects". The network has organized public "district assemblies" and street parades, and also taken some direct action all of which is reported in the media in unexpectedly appreciative tones.

Small wonder then that Hamburg's politics are buzzing, at least for the moment. The city has reacquired the historic "Gängeviertel" from the Dutch investor and is negotiating a new concept with the artists in a move that would have been unthinkable a year ago. The pipeline of the coal power plant has been stopped by court order after one of the initiatives and an environmental organization filed an action against it. Districts are planning at least partial regulation of rent hikes while – incredibly enough – urban development experts and



critical gentrification researchers are suddenly being invited to speak before municipal parliament sessions. The political class too has taken up the “right to the city” as a discussion topic, albeit in a rather less serious mode.

New urban unrest: a global theme

On the international level all this might not be too spectacular as Hamburg is a latecomer there, even though the city is considered as a forerunner in Germany itself. However, it does repeat a pattern that can be seen in other cities, like Tel Aviv, for instance, where the Ir Lekulanu (“A city for all”) movement brings together people from radically opposite positions in the political spectrum – from communists to members of the Likud – who set aside the Israel-Palestine conflict to focus on pressing urban issues like truly affordable housing, education, transportation for all and transparent fiscal politics. Ir Lekulanu also organizes political debates in neighborhood forums and its first major breakthrough was truly spectacular when in late 2008 it won 20 percent of the seats in the Tel Aviv parliament.

In the US the “Right to the City” movement (Lefebvre once again) is active in seven metropolitan areas, raising such demands as speculation-free housing, and the right to community control of politics and economic and environmental justice. Across Brazil the “Sem Teto” movement of homeless workers has addressed similar issues of misguided urban policy-making since the late 1990s. In an increasing number of cities people are no longer prepared to accept top-down-politics.

The common themes shared by all these movements are the call for true self-determination, a deep distrust of the urban political class and the desire for a quality of life that is not dictated by fossil-fuelled neo-liberalism. It is the dream of a new city that aspires to compact difference not homogeneity and liberation not control.

If and how the problems of demographics, economic crises, climate change and unsustainable energy systems can be solved, nobody can say for certain. However, what we can be sure of is that any solutions must come from the cities and that it’s a question of democracy. In his book “The Urban Revolution” Henri Lefebvre wrote: “The passivity of those involved, their silence, their reticent prudence are an indication of the absence of urban democracy, that is, concrete democracy. Urban revolution and concrete (developed) democracy coincide.” These words were written in 1970. In 2010 more than ever we can clearly hear the sound of things to come.

