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## Editorial

# Uncomfortable strategic truths: A time to pause, reflect and ponder on the need for meaningful change in our towns and cities?



As this issue goes to print, our *Journal of Town & City Management* celebrates its first birthday. Since June 2010, not much has changed in the world . . . or has it? In our special editorial with views from *JTCM's* Editorial Board on international trends in city management,<sup>1</sup> few could have predicted quite what a test the European Union would face in terms of the credibility of its currency with the rescue of the Greek, Irish and then Portuguese economies — and the saga of rescue packages may not be over yet. Neither would they have forecast the key strategic energy supply dilemmas<sup>2,3</sup> raised worldwide by the major incident occurring at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant as a result of the devastating 9.0 magnitude Japanese earthquake and tsunami, which almost coincided rather morbidly with the date of the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. We can also mention the new ceilings broken by the price of a barrel of Brent crude as a result of rising demand from China and popular uprisings in much of north Africa and parts of the Middle East, or the yet-to-be-established global security fallout of the recent capture and death of Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan. Given the pace of changes experienced by the world in the last twelve months but, more crucially, their magnitude, it may be tempting for some thinkers to air rather apocalyptic views of the future for major North

American cities, including San Francisco, Phoenix, Memphis, New Orleans and Cincinnati.<sup>4,5</sup> Laurence Smith, for instance, reminds us in his book 'The New North' that, given current trends, the expected demand for oil in 2030 will require the discovery of the equivalent of nine Saudi Arabias; China will have become the world's largest economy by 2050 (followed by the USA and India); Japan will have 13 people of working age for every 10 retired people; and global warming will lead to a complete thaw of the permafrost in the Arctic circle to free the Arctic of sea ice and open up major sea trading routes across the north of the United States, Canada, Russia, Iceland, Greenland, Norway, Sweden and Finland, with the stage set for a dramatic growth in population and local economies in these regions.<sup>6</sup>

It is in times of flux like these that it is often wise to reflect on the past and carry out a certain level of soul searching with regards to strategic priorities for the future. Behind the apocalyptic rhetoric of some thinkers, there is an easily understood anxiety that most of us can empathise with, particularly as the recovery from the world's financial crisis of 2008 continues in the West at a feeble and rather unconvincing pace, particularly in the UK and the USA. This also provides a good chance to reflect critically about the modern status quo of our towns and cities however. The papers in this issue of the

*Journal of Town & City Management* are good and timely examples of critical debates that continue to dominate conversations among city managers, policy makers and academics around the world. Ultimately, their analysis, discussion and recommendations offer glimmers of hope into viable alternatives for the future that, at the very least, should be evaluated.

April Allen (School of Planning, Design and Construction at Michigan State University (USA)) explores aspects of identity and authenticity, and their links to city branding strategies. Unusually, this paper plays homage to an often overlooked parameter in urban strategic thinking — time. As history remains the key anchor point in the identity and uniqueness of places, the paper argues that city brands should develop in a vernacular fashion that allows residents and key local stakeholders to adopt a more participative role in the development of the city, its brand and ultimately, the growth and development of its identity as history continues to be made through small everyday occurrences as well as major events. In this sense, it may well be that larger cities have a lot to learn yet from smaller towns, as is inferred by Katarzyna Ryczek in her review of the book edited by Joanna Poczobut ‘The specificity of small and medium-sized town renewal in Poland’.

In line with the reflective view presented by April Allen, Andrew Bradley (Department of Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality at the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham (UK)) provides a fascinating multidisciplinary review of attempts by academics and practitioners to define and conceptualise city marketing approaches worldwide, with the inclusion of critical marketing perspectives such as semiotic, neo-structural and post-industrial urban social justice paradigms among others, which build on established and well-grounded conceptual critique in marketing.<sup>7,8</sup> This refreshingly

critical approach to current knowledge in city marketing concludes that our understanding of this emerging discipline remains limited both in its content and scope, and suggests a new framework structure for practice and research in this field. Furthermore, this study echoes key debates in city marketing highlighted in previous issues of the *Journal of Town & City Management* by members of this Journal’s Editorial Board<sup>9,10,11</sup> and other leading thinkers in this field,<sup>12</sup> including that about the seemingly growing fissure between city marketing strategies and local communities. Given that these promotion campaigns tend to be financed ultimately with taxes raised locally, and that many economies in the West continue to be burdened by unprecedented levels of public debt and unemployment as a result of the fallout of the global financial crisis of 2008, this is a timely piece of research that should encourage policy makers and practitioners to engage in some soul searching with regards to the ‘who’ rather than ‘how’ of city marketing and branding.

Victoria Elizagarate (University of the Basque Country (Spain)) argues the importance of clear strategic marketing plans in effective city marketing with references to successful marketing-led town centre management practice through public-private partnerships in northern Spain. Her study includes a historical overview of the evolution of the concept of town centre management in the Basque Country (northern Spain) from a rather strategically limited promotional tool for towns and cities through retail to more integrated strategic urban revitalisation initiatives and ultimately, inward investment through effective city marketing and branding (eg Bilbao’s ‘Guggenheim effect’).

Martin Blackwell (Department of Property and Construction at the University of Westminster (UK)) - explores differences and parallels between

North America and the UK with respect to legislative, strategic focus and management approaches to Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and adds to this Journal's ongoing debate about the concept of BIDs,<sup>13,14</sup> though this time more from the perspective of business premise occupiers (often retailers in the UK). In his paper, Blackwell critically singles out an apparent lack of engagement of smaller, often independent retail businesses in the BID creation process in spite of their evident importance both in terms of combined retail surface area and the diversity that these smaller businesses provide to town and city centres in terms of product/service offer as well as place identity.

In a paper that may yet prove inadvertently prophetic for BIDs contemplating the possibility of a closer level of engagement with resident local communities, Jasper Eshuis, Erik-Hans Klijn and Mark van Twist (Department of Public Administration at Erasmus University Rotterdam (the Netherlands)) provide a transnational analysis and brief historical review of the ethos of housing enclaves (often, though not always, in the form of gated residential communities) as well as a more specific analysis of motivation factors among Dutch residents to live in this type of enclave. In the USA alone, over 40 million people live in housing enclaves. The authors recommend landscape design solutions for borders of housing enclaves and an organic management approach to relationship management between local authorities and enclave residents. One of the issues this study raises however, albeit indirectly, is the inversely proportional relationship that appears to exist between trust and increasing levels of affluence in modern societies,<sup>15</sup> which has important implications for the future of our town and city centres and the public-private partnerships (including BIDs) that often manage them.

On the other hand, Paola Briata (Department of Architecture and Urban

Planning, Milan Polytechnic University (Italy)) provides an insightful contribution to the debate on the management of immigration in cities initiated in this Journal by John Eade<sup>16</sup> and widens it to the sphere of urban regeneration and urban policy making by considering a local stakeholder-driven engagement process for the integration of immigrants in Turin. The innovative nature of this initiative can be matched only by its timing as Italy, and to a lesser extent France and Spain, experience unprecedented levels of immigration from the African continent as a result of the political turmoil that now engulfs much of the Mediterranean region and parts of the Middle East — particularly Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria. Once again, towns and cities in the more prosperous economic blocs continue to bear the brunt of the inequalities that exist in the world. Unfortunately, for as long as economic inequality continues to exist and grow in urban environments, between countries and between all global citizens — as Branko Milanovic succinctly argues in his book 'The haves and have-nots'<sup>17</sup> — it will be perfectly rational for people from poorer countries to try to migrate to richer ones in search of a better future for themselves and their families, even when this may be at the expense of great risk to life and family dramas.

Finally, Christian Strauß (Department of Urban Development and Construction Management, University of Leipzig (Germany)), Barbara Warner (Institute of Geosciences at Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (Germany)) and Anja Kübler (Technical University of Braunschweig (Germany)) echo some of Briata's strategic concerns with regards to population, though with special reference to spatial development and planning for land use in the east German region of Halle-Leipzig. In this study, regional cooperation rather than competition between local authorities is proposed as key

if sustainable development targets are to be achieved regionally, nationally and ultimately globally. Interestingly, many of the local strategic issues outlined in this paper, including net migration; ageing of local population; and lack of cooperation between local and regional policy-makers, mirror almost exactly those that continue to affect trans-border cooperation between countries on the international scene.

All in all, it may be valid to conclude that the content of this issue of the *Journal of Town & City Management* provides an accurate reflection of contemporary critical debates on key strategic factors affecting our towns and cities in the new millennium, regardless of recent news headlines, political battles and sound bites. Yet more fundamentally, perhaps these ongoing debates should be considered as evidence of the fact that rather than us accepting fate without questioning, our critical and reflective mindset is perhaps one of our key evolutionary advantages for adapting to change and overcoming or even predicting adversity, in the same way that so many other super-colonies of organisms, eg ants and termites, have done before us, even when we may prefer to see ourselves as in interdependent super-coalitions rather than super-colonies.<sup>18</sup> Our other key evolutionary advantage may be our contested belief that, like the places dearest to us, we have a soul . . . but that is surely a topic for discussion and debate in further editorials and issues of our Journal.

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