

The global city guide - Ricky Burdett, director, Urban Age and LSE Cities

Adam Branson, Regeneration & Renewal, 3 August 2009



Burdett: cities must learn from each other

As he travels around the world's diverse metropolises investigating their futures, the built environment expert believes our urban centres have much to learn from each other.

Ricky Burdett has his fingers in a lot of pies. Currently centennial professor of architecture and urbanism at the London School of Economics (LSE), Burdett is also chief adviser on architecture and urbanism for the London 2012 Olympics. He is director of Urban Age, a six-year sequence of international conferences examining the future of global cities being held in urban centres across Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe between 2005 and 2010. And he was one of the 13 members of the Urban Task Force, the group led by architect Lord Rogers that laid the foundations for much of the Labour government's urban policy-making over the past decade.

Burdett has now added another bullet point to an already crowded CV. In July, the LSE announced the creation of an international research centre, funded by Deutsche Bank, to explore how cities should develop in the future. LSE Cities, as the centre will be known when it launches in January next year, will be directed by... Ricky Burdett.

"(LSE Cities) continues what we've done with Urban Age," he says. "The first thing that we will do is outreach. It's about getting out there and trying to understand what is happening in the big cities around the world.

"The second thing is education. We will have short courses aimed at people who aren't going to spend three years on a PhD, but who are going to change cities around the world. The courses will be directed towards urban leaders rather than theoreticians."

In addition, he says, LSE Cities will produce original, academic research and do consultancy work with cities around the world.

Given the diversity of the cities with which Urban Age has so far worked - from Istanbul to Johannesburg - does Burdett believe that the lessons learned in one city are truly transferable to another, especially if one is in a developed country and the other in a developing nation? "Can we learn from the fact, for instance, that 60 per cent of the population in Mumbai walks to work? Well, yes," Burdett asserts.

But he highlights the importance of applying the right lessons to the right cities. "One has to be careful," he says. "The key thing is to recognise the nature of the problem. If cities have problems in terms of public transport, for instance, there's no point in introducing a congestion charge."

The biggest event in the immediate future of England's capital city is of course the 2012 Olympic Games. Wearing his Games adviser hat, Burdett concedes that the recession has taken a toll. "The two projects that took a massive hit are the Olympic village and the media centre," he says.

The fact that the Olympic village is now largely being delivered by the public sector hasn't reduced the quality of its design, he maintains. But he believes the lack of private sector interest in taking on the press facilities after the Games has caused difficulties. "The International Broadcast Centre and Main Press Centre were going to be taken on by the private sector," he says. "When that fell through because of market conditions, the Olympic Delivery Authority had to take a very pragmatic view, because there isn't the same certainty once you've built these vast sheds that you can re-sell them tomorrow morning.

"Of all the Olympics projects, the media centre is the one that has had to suffer in terms of design quality because of the uncertainty about what happens afterwards."

Overall, however, Burdett believes that the Games are on course to deliver a lasting legacy. "The most important contribution the Olympic project is making is creating a network of connections and a series of public spaces in a short period of time in an area that would otherwise never, ever have seen that level of investment," he says. "After 2012, you will have a very beautiful park and some of the better examples of landscape design that we have seen in Britain for some time."

Of course, no-one has yet agreed a use for the main stadium post-2012. However, Burdett is confident that Andy Altman - the newly appointed chief executive of the nascent Olympics legacy vehicle, and a member of Urban Age - will solve the conundrum. "We've all heard from the London Development Agency and others what the options might be, and I think that the new legacy company will take quite a strong view on that," he says.

The legacy of LSE Cities is a way off, but its initial research priority is how large-scale city design can help to mitigate climate change. "The more work I do on this issue, the more I realise how little work has been done," says Burdett. "We need to get the message out to cities that need to hear it most (due to their rapid industrialisation), like Sao Paulo, Mumbai and Shanghai."

As he flies in to assess global cities' problems, is there a danger he could be seen as some sort of neo-imperialist? "The day that I land in a city and think that I can tell people what to do, I shouldn't be doing this job," he says.

"What I can do is begin with questions, such as asking whether Istanbul today is facing the same problems London did 50 years ago, or Sao Paulo did ten years ago. One can then help by having a conversation about what happened in those other cities, as opposed to telling people what to do."

CV HIGHLIGHTS

1999: Member of Lord Rogers' Urban Task Force.

2001: Appointed architectural adviser to the London mayor.

2006: Directs the Venice Architecture Biennale.

2006: Made chief adviser on architecture and urbanism to the London Olympics.

2009: Sets up LSE Cities and becomes the research centre's first director.