



# Habitat III: How The World Can Be Transformed Through Cities

Technocrats envision a new world where the city-state replaces the nation-state, and cities are multicultural melting pots of humanity. Thus, planning, monitoring and directing is everything. □ TN Editor

“I don’t really like things being about me,” protests Trudi Elliott. It’s just as well then that the RTPI chief executive and I have met to talk about October’s Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador, which she attended with the RTPI’s president Phil Williams and international officer Marion Frederiksen.

But it’s hard to ignore the fact that she’s just reached the end of her fifth year in the job. Moreover, with positive noises about planning coming from the new regime at the Department for Communities and Local Government, there is no lack of RTPI business to chat about, too.

We start with Habitat III, however. As [trailed in \*The Planner\* in September](#), this was the third iteration of the United Nations’ conference on housing and sustainable urban development.

The event takes place every 20 years only, and each time reconfigures the international approach to tackling the challenges – and opportunities – presented by human settlements around the world.

At its heart this time is the [New Urban Agenda](#) (NUA), a blueprint for sustainable development over the next 20 years agreed by states worldwide. Unlike the Paris climate agreement, however, the NUA is not legally binding, leading to suggestions that Habitat III was little more than a talking shop.

If so, with 35,000 attendees from politics, academia, business, the professions, civil society and the media, it was a significant talking shop.

“It was amazing in terms of the scale,” says Elliott. “For someone who’s interested in planning, urbanism and global challenges there were so many things you could go to. What do you pick?”

The biggest “take home”, she says, was the sheer variety of people who attended the conference and took part in myriad side events looking at the issues around urbanisation and sustainable development.

“You would be sitting at something and you might have someone representing slum-dwellers on one side and a tech expert on the other,” she continues.

Notably, she says, there was significant business presence – a sign that commerce is taking conference themes seriously.

“This was about us collectively looking at global challenges, comparing and contrasting and coming to a shared agenda about what needs to be addressed.”

Collectively, that is, except for a significant missing group – UK politicians. Although the UK was well represented by civil society, academia, professional bodies and private business – including a delegation of civil servants from the

Department for International Development – there were no ministers or city mayors that Elliott was aware of. This brings the sole downbeat note from Elliott.

Attendance would have been an excellent chance for senior politicians to promote the UK’s international development and built environment expertise post-Brexit.

Tactfully, she suggests this may be because the event came too soon for the fledgling May government. She also notes a change in attitudes towards planning at the Department of Communities and Local Government under the new regime.

“It’s always interesting to see what other people are doing. It’s reassuring to note that some of the issues we are grappling with, it’s not just us. We found comparing and contrasting with sister institutions really quite helpful.

“In every session we felt we had something to offer and something to learn. It’s a shame there wasn’t more political engagement,” she says, adding: “We cannot adopt the ‘not invented here’ approach.”

## **Cities for all**

So what issues struck Elliott most forcefully? In a world with an expanding population and the greater proportion of people moving to towns and cities, the availability of land in the right places for good quality and affordable development is critical.

“In some places it’s the sheer quantum [of housing required], in some it’s the location. There’s formal settlement versus informal settlement, the community implications of massive redevelopment.”

Then there is the “link between housing and infrastructure, housing and jobs” and the related issues of land and tenure, and what patterns of land ownership mean for land price and assembly. “The land question came up in lots of different ways. In some places the land tenure and land valuation issues were as a big a challenge as planning.”

It’s a worldwide challenge that, Elliott stresses, links to viability and the economic and fiscal models that are used to unlock development. Are they fair? Do they privilege one set of people over another? Who benefits the most from development?

We grapple with these challenges in the UK but, says Elliott, “they manifest themselves in different ways all over the world”. Inspiration comes from seeing how different states try to resolve the conundrum.

She was particularly impressed with a scheme on Mexico's stand.

"They're doing a really interesting piece of work involving unions, developers, housing associations and the government to provide homes. The fact that unions were involved was interesting - and they'd thought about how you make the financial model stack up for the individual and for the lending organisation."

The threat of climate change was ever-present. "It's inextricably linked now to the quality of life issue and resilience. It's fundamental to how you make places where people want to live.

"It's also about how to prepare for and rebuild communities after disaster, which is why we launched the [UK Built Environment Advisory Group](#) with RIBA and the Institution of Structural Engineers at Habitat III, to give built environment support to the humanitarian sector."

The RTPI also successfully argued for the inclusion of statements about the linked issue of air quality in the final NUA, Elliott points out, adding: "There were things I wasn't expecting, too. I didn't expect the gender issue to keep coming up - the issue about how safe women feel in cities."

Indeed, she suggests, the conference could almost be distilled into the single question: "How do you create a city that works for everybody?". To answer this means tackling a deep structural issue that afflicts countries around the world, says Elliott. We are trying to resolve 21st century problems with 20th century - even 19th century -governance frameworks.

Above all, the administrative architecture of our societies, including planning systems, needs to be updated to work in tune with the modern world. How do we manage such a transition smoothly and to the benefit of the planet and the widest number of people?

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## Outsourcing Giant Sacks 2,000 Staff For Robot Replacements

[Capita](#) is the leading provider of personnel support services in the UK and is now actively replacing its staff with robots. In England alone, analysts predict that England will lose 1.3 million jobs to robots by 2030, a devastating blow to the active labor market for humans. □ TN Editor

Outsourcing giant Capita is to sack 2,000 staff and replace them with robots in a move some fear will be repeated across the economy, leading to more than 1 million job losses.

The FTSE 100-listed firm, which collects the BBC license fee and provides services for the NHS, said it needed to ax 2,000 jobs to save money due to poor trading with corporate clients.

It said it would use the money it saved to fund investment into robotic workers across the whole company, according to the Guardian.

The announcement will add to fears the world is facing a fourth industrial revolution powered by artificial intelligence (AI) which will result in unprecedented job losses.

A study published by Oxford University and consultancy firm Deloitte in

October predicted there is a 77 percent probability Britain will lose 1.3 million *“repetitive and predictable”* administrative and operative jobs within 15 years.

More than 850,000 public sector jobs - including teachers, social workers and even police officers - could also be replaced by computer programs.

MPs warned in October the government is unprepared for the coming technological revolution.

The Science Technology Committee said the government’s role in preparing for the impact of AI is *“lacking”* and cautioned that *“science fiction is slowly becoming science fact, and robotics and AI look destined to play an increasing role in our lives over the coming decades.”*

Capita saw its shares drop to a 10 year low at one point following its December statement, in which the company announced it would be selling off assets and trimming costs to protect its balance sheet after Brexit.

The company will use robots to help eliminate human error and make decisions faster, said chief executive Andy Parker, whose salary rose nine percent to £600,000 (US\$756,000) this year, according to Unite the Union.

*“It doesn’t remove the need for an individual but it speeds up how they work, which means you need less [sic] people to do it,”* he said in the statement.

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