

Yosef Jabareen

The Risk City

Cities Countering Climate Change:
Emerging Planning Theories and
Practices around the World

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To my little Warrd Jabareen

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Contemporary cities and their residents are currently facing phenomenal mounting levels of evolving risk and vulnerability stemming, *inter alia*, from social polarization, the growth of urban poverty levels, urban conflict and violence, terrorism, natural disasters, and, most recently, climate change. Cities have been contending with risks related to security and some aspects of environmental disasters since ancient times, and the intensive urbanization, growth, industrial development, and technological progress of the twentieth and early twenty-first century have compounded long-standing risks and uncertainties and created new ones. In recent years, tens of thousands of people have lost their lives as victims to these intensifying risks and threats, and the social and material infrastructures on which human life depends have been severely impacted in urban locations throughout the world. Scientists from various disciplines today agree that the destructive impact of the risk and uncertainties stemming from climate change (both those we can anticipate today and those which are as yet unknown) are likely to increase in the near future. Others argue that climate change, with its catastrophic impacts, is already happening.

In this book, I argue that risk is a constitutive concept of our cities and propose the conceptual framework of the “*risk city*” as a praxis with the potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding not only of risk and its social, spatial, structural, and physical impacts on our contemporary cities, but on the way in which cities cope with uncertainties and vulnerabilities. This book takes seriously the threats and the mounting risk facing our cities today and calls for a paradigm shift in the way we think about, interrogate, and approach urban planning. The contemporary conditions of risk stemming primarily from climate change and its resulting uncertainties, I posit, challenge the concepts, procedures, and scope of conventional approaches to urban planning, as well as our overall planning culture. The result is a pressing need to rethink and revise current planning theories and practices. Indeed, in light of the phenomenal challenges we now face, our cities simply cannot continue on with business as usual in this realm.

The aim of this book is to theorize the risk city, with a focus on the risks stemming from climate change, and to conceptualize its planning practices geared toward coping with risk and uncertainties (though not employed in this manner

here, the risk city as a conceptual framework can also be used to understand risks other than those related to climate change). The following chapters conceptualize city resilience and propose a practical framework for achieving and assessing this important goal. To examine the ways in which cities cope with risk and uncertainties, we analyze master and strategic urban plans and practices from a sample of ten cities around the world: Amman, Barcelona, Beijing, Delhi, London, Moscow, New York, Paris, Rome, and Sao Paulo. Special emphasis is placed on our analysis of New York City's ambitious *PlaNYC 2030* and on Hurricane Sandy's subsequent impact on the city and the surrounding region, which provides us with a valuable opportunity to examine the effectiveness of the planning practices employed by the city to cope with its uncertainties.

1.1 Spatializing the Risk Society

Social scientists have focused their attention on the concept of risk to the society at large and have invested little thought in spatializing risk on the city level. Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck conceptualize both modernity and modern societies in terms of risk. Giddens (1999) views risk as inseparable from modernity and as the mobilizing dynamic of societies that are bent on change and determined to control their own destiny rather than leaving it to religion, tradition, or the vagaries of nature. Prior to the modern era, cultures possessed no concept of risk and "lived primarily in the past," invoking "ideas of fate, luck or the 'will of the gods' where we now tend to substitute risk."

Beck (1992) defines the Risk Society in terms of risks that emerged in the 1960s. "Modern society," he maintains, "has become a risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced" (Beck 2005: 332). From his perspective, this was "an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialization." For Beck, the concept of "risk" replaces the concept of "class" as "the principal inequality of modern society, because of how risk is reflexively defined by actors." The theory of the world risk society, however, maintains that modern societies are shaped by new kinds of risks and that their foundations are shaken by the worldwide anticipation of global catastrophes. Such perceptions of global risk are characterized by three features (Beck 2005: 334): (1) spatial, as reflected in the fact that many new risks do not recognize the borders of nation-states and other such entities; (2) temporal, as manifested in the long latency period that are characteristic of new risks (such as nuclear waste), making it impossible to effectively determine and limit their effects over time; and (3) social, as exhibited in the complexity of the problems and the length of the chains of effect, which means that it is no longer possible to determine causes and consequences with any degree of reliability (as in the case of financial crises).

The Risk Society becomes a grand narrative that must be dismantled and deconstructed before we can truly understand its consequences. By theorizing the *risk city*, I seek to adapt this general notion to smaller-scale contexts of modernity

by shifting attention from the Risk Society as a whole to the very real risks present at the urban level. By doing so, I am attempting to spatialize contemporary emerging risk and uncertainties in the context of the city as a human habitat.

Contrary to the lack of spatiality and borders supported by Beck, I argue the necessity of spatializing the contemporary emerging risks stemming from climate change and environmental hazards (as well as global terrorism and the like) and of situating them in human spaces—mainly cities and urban communities. I also maintain what many city administrators have been learning in recent years: that in order to effectively cope with uncertainties and risks, cities need to become key actors in the process. Indeed, contemporary cities are beginning to emerge as major forces in critical areas such as human security, sustainability, and climate change. Refocusing our analysis on cities increases our chances of understanding specific risk phenomena and the actions required to deal with them. On this basis, in my quest for a praxis, “a synthesis of theory and practice in which each informs the other” (Hillier 2010: 4–5), that is adequate for contending with both risk and its oriented practices, the modern city offers the best setting in which to situate our inquiry. As a result, this shift has the potential to make a substantial contribution at both the practical and the theoretical levels.

I argue that, to a certain extent, cities have always been about coping with risk, as expressed in the following words penned by Aristotle more than two millennia ago: “Men come together in cities for security; they stay together for good life” (Blumenfeld 1969: 139). With the rapid development of technology and modernity, this aspect of cities has intensified greatly, as reflected in their increasing occupation with interrogating, estimating, preventing, managing, accepting, denying, and seeking to manipulate and cope with risks. Indeed, cities have been facing environmental, health, social, and security threats for centuries, and have always strived to reduce risks by means of various spatial, physical, social, and environmental measures.

Therefore, my aim in this book is to develop the theoretical framework of the risk city with the primary goal of filling a gap in the academic literature with a framework that not only theorizes urban risk and its uncertainty but also interrogates human risk-oriented planning practices and contributes to our understanding of the effect of these practices on urban social issues, particularly those related to social justice.

1.2 The Risk City: The Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the risk city, which I propose in Chap. 2, is based on the three primary concepts of risk, trust, and practice. Overall, the framework of the risk city is like a plane of immanence—an “image of thought” with interconnected concepts. Although it is the coexistence and reciprocal relationships among these interlinking concepts that give meaning to the risk city, each concept plays its own unique role in the framework. In accordance with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1991) approach to the term “concept,” each concept of the risk city is “created as a function of problems” or related to a problem or problems (p. 18), and “has a