

CITIES: THEIR FUTURE AND THEIR IMPORTANCE



IT IS FROM late Middle Ages Europe that we find most clearly the shape and development of today's world cities, although some ancient cities that disappeared from the global map showed some quite advanced aspects of accepted civilization, such as Mohenjo Daro, some 5,000 years ago in the Indus valley

and recognized as the cradle of ethnic Caucasians. The layouts of the several cities that the Romans built have also remained for later peoples to develop, often including key roads and routes for water supply and drainage, despite the attempts of barbaric hordes to destroy them as the Roman empire imploded.

It is the cities of Europe and then America that, from the later 18th century, provided the technological innovations that have led to the foundation for today's comforts. This period was a time of European enlightenment. New ideas, such as

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the ability to harness steam (James Watt in Glasgow), and the inventions that evolved from that provided the basis of the explosive 19th century Industrial Revolution from which modern societies have never looked back.

In today's horizon, with a steady trend over the past 200 years, we find that GDP growth is heavily dependent on urban endeavor. According to McKinsey, more than 80% of global GDP is now generated in cities, with three-quarters of this coming from just 600 urban centers. However, there is a steady shift in urbanization from the old world to the rising power of Asia, based on China, and there will be a dramatic change in the mix of the top 600 urban centers, with many older cities being superseded

by new ones in East Asia. Furthermore, by mid-century, 70% of today's population will be urban.

In Indonesia, Greater Jakarta with 30 million people is now the world's second largest urban area and with an additional 20 million people expected by mid-century, this metacity will be the largest in the world. Indonesia by then will have a further fifteen large to very large urban centers, with Surabaya a megacity, along with a big number of smaller cities and towns. Planning and developing for this needs to start now.

A recent most interesting book by Matt Ridley, "The Evolution of Everything," debunks many of our perceived wisdoms over a range of human endeavor. However, in line with our theme, he underlines clearly how urban centers of the world are the locations where there is continual technological change, ideas are proposed and only those fit for purpose and seen to meet customer demand survive.

What is even more revealing is that innovations come from the people and are not driven by government, a form of bottom up development. Analysis of government controlled efforts on research have been shown to be notoriously poor in delivery compared to those supported by private endeavor. The message is clear; governments should concentrate on providing the enabling environment for the private citizen innovator in our expanding urban environment to invent and succeed or fail according to the market. 



President Joko Widodo (center), next to a model of a train while attending a ground breaking ceremony for the Jakarta-Bandung fast-train railway line in Walini, West Java province.