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World Habitat Day Opening Ceremony
National Building Museum, Washington, DC
Monday, October 5, 2009

Welcome to World Habitat Day 2009. My colleagues and I are honored to support this exciting gathering, the first time the United States has hosted World Habitat Day.

Thank you to the National Building Museum for lending us this historic hall – a temple of the building arts. Sixteen American presidents celebrated inaugurations inside these magnificent Corinthian columns, a tradition reaching back to Grover Cleveland in 1885. But, today, the museum that surrounds us doesn't only look back at triumphs of American public works and architecture; it also looks forward, showcasing intellectual blueprints for cleaner, greener, more inclusive metropolitan growth and urban renewal.

We're joined by several of the finest urban leaders in the world and will hear from a remarkable lineup of distinguished speakers in a moment. But first some framing: As you know, our theme is "Planning our Urban Future." This theme reflects the inescapable fact that life in the 21st century will be markedly more urban and interdependent. It represents the extraordinary opportunity for cities to become field laboratories for new urban solutions – to grow more resiliently, equitably, and sustainably. And it sets a simple question in sharp relief: Will we shape the historic forces driving billions of people to cities and metro regions or will we let these forces shape us?

That the world finds itself in an urban age is now well understood. You know the numbers – the equivalent of seven Seouls or Sao Paulos are added to the planet every year. The interconnected and accelerating forces of globalization and urbanization fuel a worldwide demographic revolution, pushing the majority of people into cities and metropolitan regions for the first time in history.

This is no empty abstraction. It causes critical challenges: multiplying populations of slum dwellers, overburdening housing, transportation, and infrastructure systems, leaving millions dangerously exposed to environmental and health threats.

But the dawn of this urban age also affords singular opportunities. It is a moment for urban innovation – a time for new ideas, actions, and ways of working together. You will hear from some of our speakers in a moment that the Obama Administration is pursuing a robust sustainability agenda.

Around the world, innovation flourishes. Durban, South Africa, incorporates ongoing climate change assessments, adaptation, and mitigation into long-term city planning. Stockholm, Dublin, Singapore, and Brisbane are developing smart transportation systems – including congestion pricing – that reduce traffic and greenhouse gas emissions. In Shanghai, the world's first commercial magnetic levitation train shuttles passengers from the city's edge to its state-of-the-art airport – at 287 miles an hour – in eight minutes.

But, together, we must do more – and that means taking on sometimes controversial questions:

How do we break out of an old way of thinking – a 20th century politics – that pits rural interests against urban ones, blindly ignoring the fact that we not only live in an interdependent world, but also interconnected communities?

How do we bridge policy and practice, ensuring that the beneficiaries we try to reach have a voice in tailoring the interventions intended to help them help themselves?

How do we move away from the idea that grave urban challenges – housing and health care, energy and education, infrastructure and economic expansion – exist in isolation? How do we address them holistically?

To all of these, I'd suggest a common answer: Leadership. Leadership against the grain of misbegotten assumptions – against the entrenched status quo. Leadership to invest in cities and economic opportunity while promoting health and preventing further harm to our environment.

My Rockefeller Foundation colleagues and I discovered that we had no choice but to change in our own efforts. For a generation, we worked domestically in cities and globally in rural areas. The consensus held that, in the United States, poverty was most pronounced in cities and, around the world, it predominated in rural villages. This was true for a time, but is not any longer. Poverty's face is both urban and rural. There are poor children in America's rural communities just as there are in housing projects of America's biggest cities. There are poor children in the rapidly growing cities of developing countries just as there are in the far-away, furthest rural corners of East Africa and Southeast Asia.

Moreover, rural problems create urban migrations, further pressuring overtaxed cities. And it is increasingly apparent that the solutions come from everywhere – not only from experts, but also from people and communities developing their own innovations.

We certainly are not first to understand this, but one of our heroines may have been. Last summer, when President-to-be Obama campaigned in Ohio, a young mayoral candidate stood in the crowd and mounted a defense of America's cities and towns. He said he supported the senator because cities needed a friend, not a foe, in the nation's capital. Then he offered the senator a gift. He called it the single most important book ever written about rebuilding cities. Before the guy had a chance to finish the statement – without missing a beat – Senator Obama asked, "Is it Jane Jacobs?"

In October, 1959 – a half century ago next week – our Rockefeller Foundation predecessors approved the second of two grants to support Jane Jacobs' monograph in progress. It was a sometimes frustrating project that evolved into what that young mayoral candidate called the "single most important book ever written about rebuilding cities." For Jacobs, publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* marked the beginning of an extraordinary career, committed to realizing the principle that since the people who live in communities often know what's right for them, they ought to have a voice in creating community plans and policies.

For the Rockefeller Foundation, collaboration with Jacobs inspired fifty years of thinking about and working on urban issues: Establishing the field of urban theory and design during the late 1950s, directing seed money to community-based development organizations during and after the urban crises of the 1960s and 1970s, swinging open the doors of affordable and supportive housing through the 1980s and 90s, and mobilizing New Orleans' comprehensive, unified regional planning effort when Katrina's flood water receded, to name just a few.

This half century's experience guides our work today. We inform public policies that help working families to access affordable transit options that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We help local officials harness the power of volunteerism and activism in cities across the country. We promote innovation in urban planning, finance, infrastructure, and governance. And we foster strategies and services to help those most impacted by climate change cope with its imminent and worsening effects.

As we gather this morning, it's altogether fitting to invoke Jane Jacobs for urban crises already here and those on the horizon. She once wrote that "in order for a society to flourish, there must be a flourishing city at its core." But we also know this: In order for a city to flourish, there must be active and engaged citizens at its core, dreamers and doers who embrace the notion that citizenship is only given meaning by the measure of our actions.

As global citizens – increasingly as urban citizens – we face a choice: Either we watch as a deluge of billions surges into unplanned urban regions around the world – depleting the natural resources on which survival depends, fueling the spread of disease and possible pandemics, jeopardizing national security – or we lead by developing innovative, collaborative responses. Every community, urban and rural, has a stake. And we must start with the recognition that none of us can master the 21st century's hard challenges alone.

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