Risk consciousness and the creation of liveable cities

The landscape of risk

The evaluation of everything from a perspective of risk is a defining characteristic of contemporary society. Risk is the managerial paradigm and default mechanism that has embedded itself into how companies, community organizations and the public sector operate. Risk is a prism through which any activity is judged. Risk has its experts, consultants, interest groups, specialist literature, an associational structure and lobbying bodies. A risk industry has formalized itself. It is similar to how acute awareness of marketing emerged as a core idea to operate business over 30 years ago.

It subtly encourages us to constrain aspirations, act with over caution, avoid challenges and be sceptical about innovation. It narrows our world into a defensive shell. The life of a community self-consciously concerned with risk and safety is different from one focused on discovery and exploration.

Risk consciousness is a growth industry hardly a day passes without some new risk being noted. It is as if risk hovers over individuals like an independent force waiting to strike the unsuspecting citizen. This might concern personal safety, a health scare, school kids playing conkers in a school yard who need to wear a mask or cancelling trips to parks through fear of injury. In 1994 Factiva noted 2037 mentions of the term ‘at risk’ in UK newspapers this rose to over 25000 by 2003.

The notion of an accident seems to have gone from our vocabulary. Cleansing the world of accidents means scouring the world for someone to blame. ‘It was just an accident or was it?’ an advert asks. John Adams notes ‘bad luck transmutes into culpable negligence’ with the foresight of risk taking being reinterpreted with hindsight into a consequence of negligence.

This drives a tendency never to blame oneself or to take responsibility. Instead many litigate leading to claims of a ‘compensation culture’, yet that culture feeds on deeper fears.

The media plays important role in shaping perceptions of risk creating a climate which disposes us to expect bad outcomes. It plays a dual role. It heightens dangers and then rebukes when responses are too diligent especially in the public sector. It spectacularizes certain issues and even create panics. Which risk
factor emerges within the media or political battlefield can seem arbitrary. The risk of food poisoning highlighted is far less than risks caused by sedentary lifestyles encouraged by planning which reduces walkability in our settlements.

The opportunity side of risk taking begins to disappear. There seem to be no more good risks, all risks appear bad. The mood of the times is averting the worst rather than creating the good. Guidelines are drawn up on worst case scenarios.

Consciousness of risk comes in myriad forms, some have been with us for a long time, such as assessing the financial viability of projects. Others concerned with safety and health are more recent: child or sex abuse, bullying, and abuse of elderly recently gained headlines. Some say what we now call bullying was once called name calling or office politics. Public health is another arena of safety consciousness. HIV/Aids has curtailed liberal sexual behaviour and a safer sex message has emerged. There are scares about new epidemics from BSE, Sars to Ebola and cross-over viruses between animals and humans.

Grabbing most headlines are safety concerns about personal injury and the notion of ‘compensation culture’. Undoubtedly a perception exists that the public have a greater tendency to seek redress if they suffer an injustice or injury. People look for someone else to blame for their misfortune. The now collapsed claims management companies like The Accident Group (TAG) and Claims Direct fed an enormous number of claims into the system. They left a legacy for those helping people to pursue claims. Lawyers or insurance companies are less prepared to fund claims without high chances of success.

Claims management companies emerged five years ago after the Woolf Reform scrapped legal aid for personal injury. They gathered masses of claims by advertising on TV, radio, the press, direct marketing, street canvassing or tele sales with slogans such as ‘No win, no fee’ or ‘Where there’s blame, there’s a claim’. The Accident Group alone generated 15000 claims per month selling them on to solicitors some of whom have up to 10000 personal injury claims running with dedicated departments acting like production lines to process claims. An environment emerges where suing is seen as an entitlement as when a leading practice was asked: ‘who can I sue when nobody is to blame?’ The major categories of claims are fourfold and effect our living environment.
Employers liability in relation to injuries at work;
Road traffic accidents;
Occupiers liability say the liability of a housing association or supermarket to provide safe conditions; and
Liability under the Highways Act say in relation to tripping over a defect that is part of the public highway and the local authority has responsibility for maintenance.

Occupiers liability affects the design of buildings and their aesthetic, thus what railings or banisters are acceptable to ensure no injuries. Liability under the Highways Act affects the streetscape: Are materials slip resistant; could the design of street furniture cause injury; are trees growing out of control and cause tripping; should there be protective barriers so pedestrians do not stray into roads. The only defense for local authorities is to have ‘a reasonable system of inspection’, with everything hinging on the word ‘reasonable’. The basis of arguments concerns ‘was it reasonably foreseeable’ that an accident could occur. The boundaries of ‘foreseeable’ are continually being tested and stretched.

The rise in claims has forced local authorities to enhance their inspection and maintenance regimes with Leeds, Cardiff and Liverpool often cited as having good strategies for maintenance guidance and procedures. For example, when claims clusters occur in specific areas Leeds targets these for special attention. Significantly this has affected the culture of maintenance so maintenance is now conducted specifically with the avoidance of claims in mind rather than seeing the urban environment in terms of criteria such as ‘is it pleasing’, ‘does it feel attractive’.

Concerns about safety and health in the construction industry have been widespread and involve employers’ liability. It is widely acknowledged that the industry had dramatically to improve its safety record. There is little criticism of those safety improvements, embodied in the Construction, Design and Management (CDM) regulations which has created new professions such as planning supervisors. The process has affected urban professionals in pursuing innovations. There is a preference to go for tried and tested technology, materials or procedures.

Protecting against road accidents equally affects the look and feel of streets, junctions or interchanges with a resulting increased clutter of barriers, guard rails and excessive signage and signalling.
The paradox of risk and creativity

The simultaneous rise of the risk and creativity agenda is one of the great paradoxes today with risk avoidance strategies often cancelling out inventiveness. We increasingly demand that citizens, business and public institutions be creative, explore and experiment to survive and be competitive in a globalized world. Yet cities need to be inventive to adapt to 21st century needs. It means reconfiguring cities’ economic base and physically restructuring them to adapt to the new conditions of service based industries. Equally there are social issues to confront from the implications of increased mobility and growth of multicultural cities, crime and fear of crime and pockets of severe disadvantage that often physically lie next to affluence.

Thus new agendas are rising to the fore. One is greater awareness of environmental sustainability, another is to create more aesthetically satisfying places and a third the capacity of places to retain and attract talent that can make them economically successful. Often bold architecture and sensitive urban design play significant roles in this process. People want more from their cities so the quality of life and liveability agendas have come to the fore. This priority highlights walkability, a public realm and its associated infrastructure that fosters increased interaction between people, and urban settings that allow simultaneously for excitement and reflection. Yet for decades we have adapted the city to the car, and their needs have shaped the look, feel and atmosphere of places.

This means challenging how the built environment is put together. The sustainability agenda demands new ways of building and sometimes using novel materials; the new architecture can push at the boundaries of the tried and tested within construction, the desire for more walkable places can tip the balance between pedestrians and cars. Achieving these aims involves ‘good risks’. They confront the legacy of how things have been managed in the past, yet aligned to a culture of risk aversion moving forward becomes doubly difficult.

A trajectory of risk consciousness

What social and political conditions have encouraged a risk perspective on life? Asking the question does not denigrate the contribution risk consciousness has made to address legitimate problems. What implications has risk culture for making and shaping liveable cities and how we lead our life as individuals?
The pervasiveness of risk consciousness and aversion come from deeper anxieties about life. They are part of broader historical forces impacting on our sense of self and how we view the world. From the early 1990’s onwards a series of books highlighted a profound shift in our view of the modern world and notion of progress embedded in the Enlightenment ethos.(1) The increasing disenchantment targets the Enlightenment’s unbounded optimism, the arrogance and over-confidence of science and industrialism, the fear of out of control technology; in addition the speed and scope of globalization and its unintended effects and unconstrained pollution. This has coincided with the decline of traditional ties that provided values and models for action and readily understandable identities for individuals, be they religion, an ideology or a fixed community setting. Those value bases anchored people giving purpose and direction allowing them to negotiate life’s travails. The erosion of tradition and taken for granted relationships and responsibilities breaks continuities and establishes uncertainty within which individuals have to assess lifestyle options themselves.

The paradox is that the freedom of choice projected as liberation, especially in the commercial world, is then experienced as frightening. When little can be taken for granted, like ties of community, ideology or other forms of solidarity it is difficult to know which information to trust and what to predict. This loosening of ties feels like swimming in the rapids with free floating anxieties.

Periods of transformation and transition can involve a mix of heady expectation and worry as the foundations are re-assessed before they move to a more settled pattern. Within this setting trust in oneself and others erodes. Everything is uncertain. Francis Fukuyama defines trust as ‘the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and co-operative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of the community’. An absence of trust in humanity shapes our perception of risk. It is a symptom of the cleavages which have made us fearful and risk aware. Misfortune cannot be blamed on acts of god so the blame must lie elsewhere.

Risk consciousness rises when conditions of uncertainty and the perception of powerlessness increase. Unable to control pressing issues from environmental degradation, crime to health hazards or the imbalances created by globalization it mirrors the scenario of technology out of control. The ‘system’ is to blame for what is wrong. This effects public perceptions and the emotional frame which guides perceptions independent of the reality of risk so overwhelming objective risk calculations. The sense of powerlessness, vulnerability and impotence begins to shape self-
identity. The responsible individual as potential maker, shaper and creator of the environment becomes a passive individual always on the receiving end. They negotiate the world as a dangerous jungle with risks lurking in the undergrowth beyond the control of humanity. The author of circumstance becomes the victim of circumstance. Resilience, alertness and self responsibility lose sway and by making claims we assert our authority and identity.

How responsibility and accountability is defined is determined by social and political norms. If we focus on the fragility of people it shapes norms of accountability. People who believe they cannot cope will find it difficult to be responsible for their behaviour. Blame is credited to an external force and the sense of responsibility is distanced from ourselves. It legitimates the growth of litigation and shifts individualism defined as self-sufficiency and personal responsibility to a rights oriented individualism. As Furedi noted the expansion of the right to compensation is proportional to the shrinking of individual autonomy.

Ironically this raises a further paradox as the science that now allows us to assess and calculate risk is the science that we blame for causing risk in the first place. The capacity to absorb the speed of change is difficult which is why the notion of the precautionary principle has gained currency. That principle suggests we are not merely concerned about risk but are also suspicious of finding solutions. It is best not to take a new risk unless all outcomes can be understood in advance. Judgement remains the key in deciding where to act with caution and where to give leeway for experiment.

**Risk and the urban professions**

25 urban professionals including engineers, architects, project managers, valuers, quantity surveyors, estate agents and property developers were interviewed to assess how their work and perspectives are shaped by risk consciousness. They concluded:

- **‘Risk has moved into the core of what we do’**

  ‘Increased risk process tends to focus on managing the downside rather than considering potential’. The consensus is of a clear increase in the awareness of risk especially with the development of CDM regulations. A number noted that risk has sharpened up their practices, yet felt it constrained their capacity to innovate and provide certain design features. ‘There is now little intelligent interpretation of the rules’.

- **‘The risk industry has a vested interest in a climate of risk’**
None of the design professionals is against design review processes, but there is a hardening view that risk assessment professionals ‘want an increasing climate of risk as it justifies their existence’.

- ‘The new planning supervisory and risk assessment roles reduce the risk for themselves’

Those with responsibility for design tend to believe those attracted to risk assessment are not people with imagination. Acerbically someone noted: ‘they are from the lower end of the gene pool – most of them want the ordinary because they can manage the ordinary’. The notion of undertaking work on the basis of ‘reasonable endeavour’ is declining.

- ‘Do risk assessors understand design?’

Lack of understanding of risk assessors or safety auditors often makes assessments inadequate especially in relation to environmentally sustainable design. Criticisms centre on a desire for design to be looked at from a broader, long-term perspective.

- ‘Increased resources are being spent on risk assessment’

Practically every practice is spending more resources on risk than five years ago. This ranges from employing people with legal experience or risk assessors as part of instituting new management procedures. Insurance cover for all professions has increased, beyond the level of inflation.

- ‘The rise of intermediaries cramps our style’

In the past engineers dealt with a single client, who might take the whole risk of an innovative project. Now more projects are undertaken through intermediaries such as projects managers and contractors. This fragmentation tends to increase risk aversion.

- ‘Passing the parcel on risk’

In a world of multiple contracting and intermediaries where is risk located. ‘There is a merry go round’ with people trying to pass on and export their risk to someone else. Risk should reside with those best able to manage a specific risk was the consensus. ‘The price we pay if you create pressures on various consultants to manage their own risk by building in too many safeguards is that engineers will over design and build in self-preservation and waste’.

- ‘More safety rather than health conscious’
The risk agenda from the perspective of urban professionals focuses too exclusively on safety and not health. This stunts debate on creating urban environments and developing a regulations and incentives regime that fosters healthy lifestyles. This ranges from encouraging public transport, walkable urban settings or cycling friendly environments.

- **‘Keeping close the client and consultation’**

The way forward proffered was to develop risk mitigation strategies by keeping close to clients and other contractors in a collaborative process of systematic risk assessment. Closeness to clients will help avoid litigation.

- **‘The biggest risk is not to take the risk’**

The risk of not going against the grain of perceived rules ‘was the far greater one of creating depressing cities that do not work emotionally’ so generating spin-off problems from crime to vandalism. ‘Our palette of possibilities is shrinking’

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References:


