URBAN 2.0

The business view: using urban frameworks for urban resilience

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Interviewee: Mike Henderson – Resilient Cities Lead, Arup

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The City Resilience Framework. Image by: Arup

Mike,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about the work of the global sustainable development consultancy Arup to support city resilience around the world.
I am looking forward to discussing the City Resilience Framework (which was developed by Arup with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation), the status of urban resilience around the world today, what should be focused on in the coming years, and how to bridge gaps that exist.

I may refer to [a set of principles I use in my Urban 2.0 work](#) sometimes, which are described below:

Urban 2.0 principles (by: G Byatt)

Urban 2.0 principles

Meaningful benefits

The right mindset (to achieve good urban places)

The right investment

Good governance

Good systems thinking

Meaningful involvement

Meaningful targets

Can we begin with an overview of your background, and what you focus today as the Resilient Cities Lead for Arup?

Mike: Thanks for the opportunity to discuss the world of urban development. I entered this arena at an undergraduate level, studying Town Planning and Landscape Design in the UK. After university, I started my career initially with the Defra Waste Strategy team and then joined Land Use Consultants, a UK-based firm (while there, I completed a Masters in Environment, Politics and Globalisation at Kings College London). Amongst their activities, Land Use Consultants pioneered two areas in the early 2000s:

1. *The creation of a [Sustainability Appraisal](#), which they helped to write the guidance for, and*
2. *Guidance on how to conduct a [Landscape Character Assessment](#) (LCA).*

My career path led me to be involved in the development of facilities for the [2012 London Olympic Games](#), working for [AECOM](#) at the time, and then the [2016 Rio Olympic Games](#). Concurrent to these Olympics experiences I was increasingly getting involved in sustainability strategies for large urban masterplans and a corresponding range of sustainable infrastructure, including water management, climate change and climate adaptation.

In 2013, the Rockefeller Foundation set up 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) to help selected cities build resilience for physical, social, and economic challenges they face. A year later, in 2014, the first City Resilience Framework and City Resilience Index were created through 100RC. This initiative had close support and guidance from Arup and others including AECOM, and I started to support city resilience strategies and helping to apply a variation of the 2014 CRF amended for the 100RC programme, for various cities in different parts of the world (100RC later became the Resilient Cities Network).

Following an interesting time leading a team on climate risk assessments, climate capacity assessments, and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Green City Action Plans, and an interesting role between 2021 and 2023 focusing on regenerative cities for Ramboll, a city-orientated opportunity arose to join Arup in mid-2023.

Today, my focus is on Arup's International Development work to support city and urban development and climate management, particularly in emerging markets. My role sees me linking with two Arup portfolios in particular – Climate and Sustainability Services, and City Planning & Design. I liaise closely with these two teams, and others in Arup, to oversee and help coordinate our teams to provide services to support cities, especially with development clients in emerging markets.

As I mentioned just now, the first CRF was created in 2014 – and Arup's leadership of the CRF is through the International Development team that I am part of. Our refresh of the CRF, which we call CRF'24, was launched in 2024.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview, Mike. It's helpful to see how the CRF is used by and supports the activities of teams within the global Arup organisation.

What was the genesis for a refresh of the CRF to be created? For teams that have used the 2014 version of the CRF, would they benefit from conducting a fresh review with the 2024 version?

Mike: I'll first provide some background to the launch platform we have used to gain maximum awareness about the CRF – both in 2014 and in 2024. We have launched both CRF releases at the World Urban Forum [1] as it is a widely attended global in-person and online forum organised by UN-Habitat. The first 2014 CRF was launched at World Urban Forum 7 (WUF 7) held in Medellin in 2014. Ten years later, we launched CRF'24 at World Urban Forum 12 (WUF 12) in Cairo in November 2024.

Nothing stands still in the world of urban development, and we wanted to do something with CRF'24 to incorporate a decade of learnings and feedback from using the CRF in different parts of the world and in different circumstances and contexts.

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[1] The World Urban Forum was established in 2001 by the United Nations to examine one of the most pressing issues facing the world today: rapid urbanisation and its impact on communities, cities, economies, climate change and policies. The first WUF was held in Nairobi, Kenya in 2002 and has been held around the world ever since.

I want to highlight in particular the work of a colleague of mine at Arup, [Jose Ahumada](), and the continuing leadership in this space from [Jo da Silva]() to make CRF'24 happen.

Some key points we took away from feedback we received about how the CRF has been used since 2014, and ideas to improve it, are as follows:

1. ***Consistency, simplicity and relevance of language is important****: one of the reasons people like the CRF is that it provides common language to be used across municipal departments, and with common language it can support engagement across departments.*
   a. *For CRF'24 we felt we had an opportunity to take a fresh look at the wording and terminology we use to describe what city and municipal departments do, and how they should work together.*
   b. *The CRF'24 retains the original's urban system theory baseline whilst modifying the language in a way that we hope resonates even better with people who use it (not only city and municipal teams, but others as well such as businesses and investors).*

2. ***Diagnostics are great, if you have resource capacity to use them****: a key piece of feedback from cities we have worked with is that using [the Resilient City Index](), which was created to support the 2014 CRF, and the linked effort to create detailed urban diagnostics and statistics is valuable if a city / municipal team can make the time to create and then use and maintain them – which we appreciate tends to be more likely with teams in large cities that have the resource capacity. Those in smaller cities and certainly at a town level have less capacity – creating a detailed diagnostic is a struggle for them.*
   a. *We have refocused our approach to diagnostics, to simplify it and make it scalable.*
   b. *[The Resilient City Index]() is still available, whilst appreciating that some city teams may not be able to leverage it, at least not in one go.*

3. ***Urban masterplanning needs to be scalable and flexible****: the CRF'24 includes a focus on masterplanning (which links to the experience of the Arup City Design and Planning portfolio team).*
   a. *We have sought to demonstrate how the CRF can work for people at different scales of urbanisation – from a total view of very large cities through to much smaller urban areas (such as towns or districts).*

4. ***Urban investment cases and funding need time and focus****: in discussing investment requirements and funding opportunities with people involved in urban development, we feel there is an opportunity for us all to get better at creating investment cases to support the urban development process.*
   a. *In CRF'24 we make a specific point of describing the importance of well-articulated compelling investment cases for urban initiatives.*

Gareth: Thanks for these detailed points about [the work to create CRF'24](), Mike. I can see some linkages to the Urban 2.0 principles I mentioned earlier, such as the need for the right investment, good governance and good systems thinking.

Noting your point about how CRF'24 can be used and that feedback from people using CRF included the point that it's not possible for all urban places to collect lots of data for analysis, hopefully city and municipal teams can agree on a "minimum set of data" to collect, use and monitor to support sustainable urban development? I have discussed this matter with urban economists such as Alain Bertaud, for example. Context, as ever, is key.

Mike: I think it is important to be clear about the type of data that is required to carry out assessments to understand our urban priorities. A balance needs to be struck between having enough data to be confident in decisions to be made and having so much data that we are overwhelmed by it or not confident of making good use of it.

We want to avoid data paralysis. A good guide is to agree how much data we need to make decisions, and to monitor effectiveness of outcomes and progress from there onwards.

Gareth: The investment case point you have made has got me thinking about how people who lead city work and urban management can best think holistically about their anticipated and actual investment proposals alongside their city and municipal budgets, as part of ongoing purposeful connections with prospective investors including in the private sector. What are some of the key points to be clear about for investment cases?

Mike: Perhaps it's worth "unpacking" the investment case point, with some working examples of CRF'24 updates we have made.

The need to create good investment cases is paramount, and to achieve this, we need a shared language and understanding of needs (per point 1 above). One of the learnings we have noted with the CRF is how it can help to strengthen the relationship between the people who develop a city / urban strategy and the funders who can fund its implementation.

People involved in making urban places better want help to (1) organise their activities, (2) make the best use of limited resources and (3) make decisions that benefit their citizens and businesses. When it comes to investment and funding to support what they want to do, sometimes we see a difference in perspective of people who operate at a city / municipality level (who seek to secure financial resources for their initiatives) and the perspective of funders such as development banks and commercial investors (who think in finance terms). Funding is available from funding organisations if the people seeking it can make compelling investment cases for it. Funders need to be shown how urban investments will fit with their goals and their investment portfolio strategy.

I therefore think it is important that the people who oversee and lead cities and urban initiatives know how to create a compelling investment case which fully resonates with potential investors and funders. I see a few points to help with this:

1. ***Know what your customer (potential investor / funder) wants:*** *we have to know our customer, which means knowing what financial investment requirements are and to describe what we are seeking to do in these terms. Financial explanations include capex and opex planning, cashflow, calculated financial benefits and non- financial benefits, all of which need to align with the requirements of investors.*

2. ***Think about the most compelling investment scale for the investor / funder:*** *the people who oversee and lead cities and urban initiatives teams need to understand the scale of investment that potential investors will be interested in – which will differ depending on the context of the investor(s). They need to understand what potential investors will expect in financial and non-financial value to be delivered as a result of making an investment. We must always remember that if an investment is committed, it will be at the expense (opportunity cost) of investing in something else – so what makes our pitch worth more than other options (urban and other)?*

3. ***Think about finance package options that will resonate:*** *there must also be a clear strategy by city teams of how they can work with their investors and funders to identify financial packages that work for everyone involved, with the recognition of the need to have good financial governance in place.*

Given these three points, perhaps city and municipal teams could think about their approach to making investment cases in this way:

- *Rather than asking banks and other investors what investment products and vehicles they have that would suit their own city / urban proposals, is there merit in them thinking about making a bigger pitch, by either linking a number of proposals for their city together, or combining their idea with other cities that want something similar to increase its scale?*
- *This relates to point 2 above of understanding the scale perspective of a major investor who thinks in a scale of tens of millions of dollars or greater, and who will want to see a value assessment and an attractive pipeline of investments.*
- *Perhaps several cities combining forces with each other to provide scale (and scale of benefits) might be worthwhile. Having said this, I completely appreciate that it isn't easy to do – city and municipal teams are already stretched with managing their essential existing needs, and what I am suggesting requires significant thought and effort.*

As I mentioned earlier, how to make a compelling investment case was one of the key areas of focus we have had in mind as we worked through our updates for CRF'24. We hope that this focus can help people define a good vision and corresponding investment cases to investors and funders, to make change through positive urban development happen.

To answer your last point, about whether teams that have used the 2014 release of the CRF would benefit from conducting a review using CRF'24, I would say the answer is "It depends". If they feel their work is progressing well, perhaps just a quick review of CRF'24 may help. If they need more focus, perhaps a more detailed review of all parts of CRF'24 can help them (such as the focus on investment cases).

Gareth: I wonder how many city, municipal and local authorities have developed a thorough understanding of what an urban initiative investment case requires, and how to develop a compelling brief that resonates with investors to give them confidence to seriously consider making an investment?

Mike: It's an important point. It's great that cities and municipalities create ambitions and visions of where they want to get to, and a lot of good thought goes into them (and to understanding the constraints and confines they need to work within). A strong ambition and vision require good political leadership. The Resilient Cities Network provides support on how strategic decision-making can be managed in city and municipal government (as its predecessor, 100 Resilient Cities, did). Mayors and their teams need to be intimately involved in the process.

Whilst, as you say, cities and municipal teams have finance teams that undertake a range of activities, I think city and municipal authorities need support on investment funding knowledge and understanding. I appreciate that these teams do not work in finance and investment circles, and it takes time to learn how investors work.

As a starting point, if we think about development banks and other investment vehicles including private sector institutions, they will have particular lending criteria which is a blend of financial and non-financial. We need to understand this in order to articulate an investment case for our idea or need to see how it aligns to a lender's criteria (if we have a divergence of understanding, we may need to rethink our approach).

I sometimes think about "the resilience dividend" to assess how long-term plans can deliver financial and non-financial value. Translating this through to what investors are looking for, I think there are a few points to consider. The first is to understand what type of scale is attractive to them to make a meaningful difference. The second is to demonstrate good cash flow and the economics of making investments work. The third is to articulate non- financial benefits, and to clearly explain how the financial and non-financial parts come together.

Gareth: Liaison with development banks and the private sector by city and municipal teams is an interesting point. I have seen that it is also important that people in financial institutions gain a clear understanding about how the value of a potential investment they may make will be managed and monitored, and how all parties involved in such initiatives – including large and small businesses doing the work – can be engaged with workable processes for this tracking. Something I have discussed with people is how to ensure paperwork required by financiers is not too heavy that it puts off small businesses from getting involved in the initiatives they are funding. I wonder if the SDGs can play a role here in some way.

Mike: It's an interesting point, and it is an example of how people involved in urban development can support and help investors to get the most from their investments.

Gareth: Continuing the point about creating good investment cases, I wonder if people in city and municipal teams would benefit from attending focused training and skills development workshops, including examples and case studies, and hearing from development banks and private sector investors and funding organisations on how they operate and what they look for in investment cases.

I'm also reminded of the interview I held with Hayley Gryc of the Arup International Development team in December 2024 about this team's work, which included how they support client investment plans. We discussed examples such as the work carried out in the state of Nagaland in India where, on behalf of GFDRR and their Global Program for Safer Schools (The World Bank), they developed a prioritised investment plan to improve school infrastructure for more than 2,000 schools. We also talked about examples of how initial funding can kick-start initiatives that grow into larger scale work. [2]

I'd like to broaden this discussion thread from the investor group to other groups to engage with. For example, I have been talking with people working in the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) space, about how they should be meaningfully engaged in urban development.

Mike: Effective engagement with a wide range of people to agree what cities and towns need and what the priorities are is critical. It takes time to do, but it pays dividends, and it needs to be done in a way that works for the people who you want feedback from. The 100 Resilient Cities work stressed this point, and it has been a continued focus for the CRF since 2014 and the ongoing Resilient Cities Network. A good, early and full engagement process in which lots of people are engaged to provide input, bringing people together to discuss a range of matters with the support of a structured approach, sets city and municipal teams up for success and allows the vital cross-fertilisation of perspectives and ideas.

Engagement sessions can be very generative and valuable when they work well. People can work through a range of matters, shortlist priorities, agree which areas warrant deep-dive sessions on specific identified aspects, and collaboratively collect data and evidence to support what needs to be done.

This type of approach can lead to writing contextualised solution options and proposals on how to tackle agreed priorities. An iterative approach of "review evidence – participation – review evidence again" can generate something larger than the sum of its parts. It includes the hard-to-track and valuable serendipity of spin-off conversations people who meet each other have and may then follow up on.

By the way, we trialled the CRF'24 draft with Broward County in Florida in the USA and Penang in Malaysia, and we obtained some good feedback from them which we have incorporated to help us use language that makes sense to different types of city and municipal authority teams (which relates to the "meaningful involvement" principle that you describe in your Urban 2.0 principles).

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[2] Interview with Hayley Gryc, Arup International Development team, Dec 2024.

Gareth: I am a supporter of using good in-person and digital communications methods to get people involved, and putting them first in the process, which includes holding reviews (whether in person or online) at good times of day for people, and in places that are local to them.

I am anticipating that meaningful involvement of everyone includes discussing prioritisation of needs given city / town constraints – whether it is everything within the urban system or certain parts of it such as water resilience, energy resilience, or focusing on disaster risk reduction and resilience to hazards. Indeed, I see the need to review resilience to hazards that can cause disasters as an increasing area of focus.

Mike: I agree. A point of reflection for me having been involved in the CRF from 2014 onwards is that the qualities of resilience, which are embedded in the CRF, are broadly the same across different urban scales (which links to the third point I mentioned for the CRF'24 refresh, about flexible masterplanning). We know that threats, hazards and vulnerabilities (shocks and stresses) for places change over time, as does our understanding of them. The way that shocks and stresses impact people, places, organisations (including city and municipal authorities) and nature in urban environments changes. In CRF'24 we have looked at how to view this, including how we define what a hazard is today and what it might be in future.

Gareth: Thanks for this context, Mike. Linked to this discussion about engagement with everyone, and how its use may lead to the identification of emerging needs, I am right in saying that the CRF is a framework that can link with other frameworks and methodologies. Also linked to the point about engagement, what feedback have you received from the launch of the CRF'24, at [WUF12](#) and elsewhere?

Mike: We had very positive feedback from its launch. We will continue to track feedback as use of CRF'24 becomes (we hope) more widespread.

The CRF is indeed designed to link with other frameworks. We appreciate that different methodologies and offerings for urban frameworks exist, and we hope that the updates we have made to the CRF make it a useful tool for everyone involved in improving the world's cities, and towns as well.

It's worth noting that the CRF has helped to create and modify a number of related frameworks. For example, Arup has created frameworks for [water management](#), [energy resilience](#), [rail and urban transport](#) and [rail resilience](#). We have also seen a real increase in demand around climate resilience. The [Disaster Resilience Scorecard for Cities](#) produced by UNDRR is another example of linked framework, which I was involved in with some of my colleagues in the past.

I think it is fair to say that there is a demand for frameworks to support total urban resilience, using a systemic approach to define how a city functions as a system. Whilst it is the case that during the past ten years we have seen a number of sector-specific focus areas, along with climate resilience, we need to ensure we maintain a total view of how urban risks have various sources and they can result in multiple impacts.

We do not want to be overly focused on one area at the risk of failing to see or anticipate linked areas of risk. Urban systems thinking is an important part of keeping things together and avoiding silos.

Gareth: It's good to hear about your involvement with the UNDRR Disaster Resilience Scorecard for Cities, Mike. I had the pleasure of [interviewing some of the people involved in creating the Scorecard Action Guide in September 2023](#).

Linked to your reference to always thinking about total resilience, for the past few years I have been involved in [supporting the Municipality of Bordeaux with their integrated resilience efforts](#). For the past few years in the month of October, timed to coincide with the annual focus of [Urban October organised by UN-Habitat](#), the municipality has put together a programme of events in which they engage with the private sector and their city's citizens on what is happening. it's a great event to be part of, and [in October 2024 it took place over the month](#).

I have found it interesting over the past few years to see how many different events and activities have been organised in Bordeaux, for the general public and for municipal teams and businesses, to support how resilience is discussed in an integrated manner for the city and its metropolitan area.

Photos of various aspects of Bordeaux's "resilience engagements" in 2023 and 2024 (by: G Byatt)
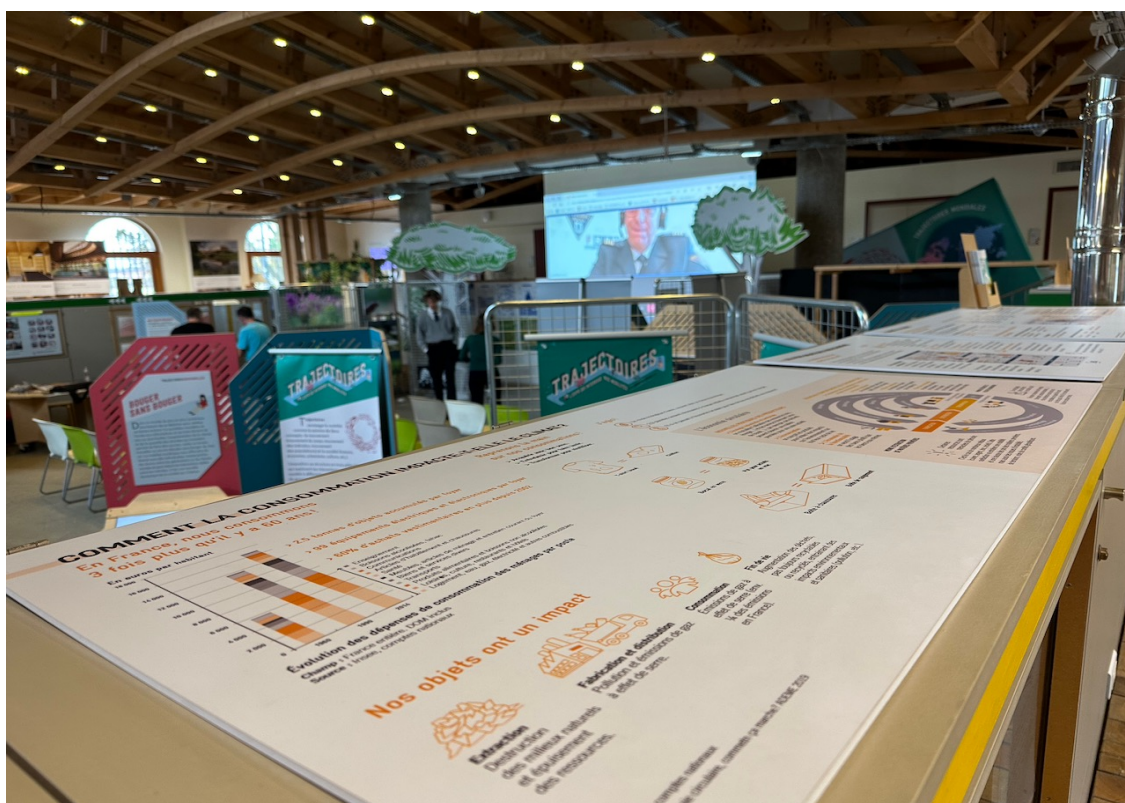
Gareth: I have a couple more questions about the design and structure of the CRF.

First, how does the CRF link with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda? I know that Arup, through its Sustainable Development Policy, has a commitment to contribute meaningfully to the SDGs. Hayley Gryc of the Arup International Development team explained this to me in our interview in December 2024. Second, does the CRF help people to focus on and deliver action in line with the targets of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, as part of ensuring urban disaster risk reduction and resilience around the world is given the focus it needs?

Mike: Linkages to the SDGs and to the Sendai Framework are valuable. With a key focus of CRF'24 being on common understanding and good engagement (as we discussed just now), we aim to support discussions at the detailed level about urban improvements in a city / municipality through to reviewing the context of a larger geography than one city or a town with a national planning minister or other senior leaders. A cascading linkage between what we can do at a city / town level through to a state or national level, linking into global frameworks like the SDGs and the Sendai Framework can be useful to support this.

A cascading effect, where those at a national and international level can focus on the things they need to focus on, linked to actions at a more detailed city / municipality level, helps ensure people are aligned.

The city / municipality detail is key, so if objectives are clear and if we can show how benefits flow down and up, and across, it can be powerful across the board.

Gareth: With regard to implementing CRF'24, you mentioned scalability earlier. Context is of course always key. Does it sometimes make sense for a city or town to "think big, start small and scale" in a way that is appropriate for their needs and available resources? I have seen a few case studies for cities of different sizes that describe how they have adopted this approach.

Urban 2.0: think big, start small and scale (image by: G Byatt)
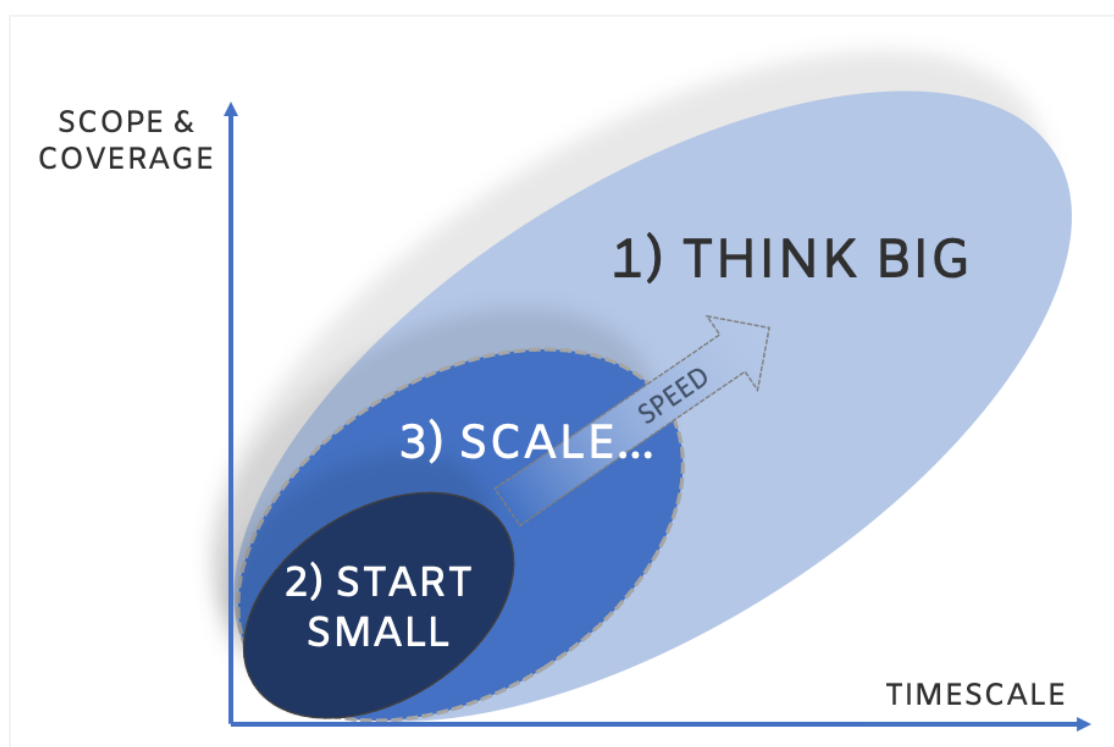
Mike: This approach can indeed work. Thinking about what the right scale is to make decisions at is important, and it may mean that you consider a phased approach to activities.

For an urban planner, a related point to consider is that the needs of cities and towns do not adhere to administrative boundaries.

For example, if we think about the scale of certain systems that impact our cities and towns, the food system is a global one, the urban water system is regional / district, and an urban transport system is local to the city / town, a dense system that has connectors into and out of it to allow it to link with other areas.

This can be a useful concept to overlay on the urban system so that we understand how and where different parts of it intersect, what the best linkages between them are, and who is best placed to decide on decisions required, especially where certain systems interlink.

The global frameworks of the SDGs and the Sendai Framework can help us with an overall guiding focus, and to help us see where a specific remit starts and finishes and how it links to the remits of others.

Gareth: Could you provide a few recent examples of where and how the CRF has been used to support / drive urban initiatives, and what outcomes have resulted from them or are being monitored?

Mike: For me, it doesn't matter how you use the CRF as long as you get something genuinely useful out of using it (per our point earlier, ideally, we can track as many uses of the CRF as possible and learn from them). People who are looking at how to improve urban places should not get caught up with whether they are following a specific implementation process. It's right for you if it is supporting tangible outcomes. It should be helping people to make good decisions, which comes back to our earlier point about how much data and information we need to make decisions. How we involve and engage people in decision-making is important, which links back to adaptive and agile good governance.

When it comes to analysing and monitoring outcomes from using the CRF, perhaps we could benefit from a piece of work being done to obtain details of all initiatives that have used the CRF (in whatever way) since 2014, and analyse actions taken as a result of using it to see how far these initiatives have been able to progress along the pipeline / implementation lifecycle, and to assess the outcomes of those that have been implemented and lessons learned. There may be some initiatives proposals that did not materialise into actual projects, and we need to learn from these as well as initiatives that are implemented.

To give you a few examples of CRF use, Cape Town is interesting, particularly around understanding their resilience pressure points with water. [Penang](#) is keenly maintaining their momentum of using it. When I was in India recently, I found it insightful to talk with people in the city of Surat, which was a pilot city for the original City Resilience Index that was launched in 2014. This city was not part of the original 100 Resilient Cities network, however, it trialled the City Resilience Index through its own initiative when this Index was introduced. The city of Surat is continuing to use CRF'24 and the Index to structure their approach to resilience. I have also seen in India some great work being done in Chennai, including green infrastructure and action to manage heat. They have shown some great ambition and a will to get things done.

I think we always need to remember, as you have rightly said a few times, the context of each city and locality, and that they all have different starting points and available resources to tackle different things. We always need to keep in mind that a framework needs to show its worth with material and practical solution options that can be considered for implementation. A governing body such as a city / municipal authority or a local authority needs to be action-orientated, and to make sure through their governance that they do not get unduly tied up in process and analysis at the expense of finding real solution options to review and to decide what to move forward with.

Gareth: Thanks for emphasising the point about being action-orientated, Mike. I agree this is key for any framework and system that is used for sustainable urban development.

Barcelona, as you mention, is an interesting example of a large city that has looked at how to use urban frameworks including the CRF and also UN-Habitat's CRPT. I know they have written about their experiences, and that they found that, in their experience (noting that every city and town is different and has its own context), it worked best for them when they tackled smaller parts and then scaled up.

One of the principles I always keep in mind is the need for good governance in everything that we do.

Mike: Good governance is critical. A team at Arup is liaising with UNDP on an initiative that is based out of Bangkok, which is covering the region of Asia and is looking at adaptive governance and how to embed agile decision-making to manage complex crises and different interlinked problems. It will be interesting to see how this work develops.

Gareth: I wonder if this initiative has any linkages with the use of modern technology. Technology has arguably always been used to support urban centres, ever since Uruk, the first generally acknowledged city, emerged around 5000BC.

Nowadays there is strong interest in how AI can support urban development and resilience, from synthesising interviews of local communities to making urban development planning more efficient and improving societal security.

I am following the Arup "[AI for Future Cities](#)" series, and I know Arup regularly publishes viewpoints and perspectives about the big questions facing urban environments. I am also thinking of teams such as [the UNDP SDG AI Lab](#) that is based out of the UNDP Istanbul office.

Mike: It's a good point. The application of AI is an interesting consideration, one that I think many of us are trying to better understand. There is a lot of potential on how AI can be used, and I think we are all still in the early stages of learning about the possibilities.

Gareth: There's certainly a lot to say about the potential for applying AI to the urban world. It's a topic I continue to research.

I'd like to gain your views on how well knowledge and experience about urban development is shared and applied around the world, including the use of frameworks like the CRF. I am thinking in particular of knowledge sharing at the local level, where implementing initiatives is a balancing act of managing competing demands with finite and often stretched resources (including time).
Something I am continuing to grapple with – and this is speaking as someone who is trying to contribute to knowledge sharing through activities such as writing a book, managing websites and newsletters and holding interviews – is, what is the best way to share knowledge in a world where people are time-poor and they are being asked to do a lot in an already busy day?

Many high quality knowledge sharing forums and events, in person and online, exist, yet I wonder whether this wealth of knowledge is tapped into by people at the local level and turned into meaningful action. Do you have any views on how we can be as efficient as possible with how we share knowledge for practical uses, particularly at the local level where real action happens, or not?

Mike: I wish I had a simple answer! Whether it is in one organisation or as a network of organisations or as individuals or in workshops, we are all striving to increase our capacity to learn.

As you say, there are some great networks out there that offer a variety of learning and also research. Many academic institutions are doing some excellent work in a wide range of ways, we must also say – including urban development courses, studies and valuable research.

People who are involved in looking at how to develop and improve cities and towns need to always bear in mind (perhaps this is a mindset, as you mentioned earlier) that whilst they have some unique contexts, they can learn from others who have faced similar challenges before. There are lots of tried and tested approaches and outputs out there that we can tap into when we find the time to do so.

When we start doing things, we start to see things and things can be discovered and uncovered. One point I think we should all bear in mind that there is learning, and there is doing, and we need to find a happy medium between the two. Sometimes we have to take on an initiative to see if it works.

Gareth: I wonder whether everyone involved in cities and towns – including businesses, citizens and others – would be open to make the time to hold structured peer assist reviews with other city / town teams that have tackled a challenge or a problem that they are facing "right now", to actively learn from them and work out how to move forward with tangible outputs that matter. I've used this approach with teams managing large capital projects in the past and I find it works well (it's not a new idea or a new approach).

Mike: Structured knowledge transfer works well in the right context. Hopefully with a range of knowledge sharing options available, people can use what works for them. There are always passionate and driven people who are capable of driving forward initiatives, and they usually want to find out examples and good case studies to learn from.

Gareth: Thanks Mike. My final question for you: is there any particular aspect or area you would like to see focused on in the coming years for sustainable urban development?

Mike: In addition to all the aspects we have discussed in this interview, I am keen to see how we keep making the time to understand how to use the most valuable tools that are available to support good decision making for urban places.

I am also very keen to see how the world can genuinely "level up" in urbanisation (which links back to our discussion about the SDGs). The biggest urban development activities in the coming years are, I foresee, set to take place in developing nations and states in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The pace of urbanisation in many of these countries is extremely rapid. Some are already highly urbanised; many are not.

I'd like to see agreement on the model we need to use to help shape new urban areas in developing economies. In such places, there are cities and towns that do not have the capacity to look at this, and sustainable development is a challenge to put in place. How do we plan rapidly for these rapidly urbanising places? There is a lot that we can learn from each other. It's not a question of cities in developed economies having all the answers. If new urban areas can get their planning right, they can become successful places for people to live and work.

Gareth: If we can get urban planning of new urban areas right, it could represent a terrific opportunity for them to how good sustainable development can be achieved, which perhaps well-established cities and towns can take learnings from.

Mike: Absolutely. By 2050, the physical footprint of cities in Africa could double in size. What about the fast-growing cities in other regions too?
Fast urban growth in the developing world represents a huge change – the question is, how will it be carried out?
Secondary cities in one of these countries often struggle for resources to manage development, whilst they are seeing more people arrive every day.

Gareth: To your point about the rapid growth of urbanisation in developing countries, this brings us back to the simple and widely used model of risk of the presence of a hazard, vulnerabilities that exist and exposure. I have interviewed Terry Gibson about this matter – Terry has published a book called Disaster Makers in 2025, and he publishes some good video clips, including one launched in March 2025.

Thank you very much for your time, Mike. I look forward to continuing to follow the work of Arup to support thriving, green and resilient cities.

Very interesting to find out about [Arup's Ventures team](), by the way, which works to commercialise and scale novel ideas across the built environment.