

Oona Strathern, born in Dublin, grew up in Notting Hill, London; studies in anthropogeography at the University of Bristol. She has been a trend researcher, consultant, speaker and author for more than 20 years. She has written books about the history of futurology as well as the architecture of the future, and worked on numerous studies carried out by the Zukunftsinstitut she founded together with her husband Matthias Horx. Her favourite topics are architecture as a life style, urban development and socio-demographic change as well as the relation between emotions and technology.

An interview with Oona Strathern

FUTURE LIVING, FUTURE BUILDING

Ms. Strathern, what do you think will make the city of the future liveable?

I believe that the open living room will play a key role in the city of the future. This term refers to an interesting public space easily accessible for everybody. In Ancient Greece this was the Agora, a public space which provided an important function in society. It was the place where people came together to trade, to discuss politics, to gossip or just to pass the time of day. We should translate this idea in a modern form.

Will sustainability continue to be an issue in urban architecture?

In a best case scenario, we will succeed in establishing the cradle-to-cradle method. This would mean building materials are strictly limited to non-toxic, non-harmful biodegradable construction materials that have no negative effects on the natural environment or on the inhabitants. They can therefore be used in continuous cycles as the same product without losing their quality.

As an alternative I see modular forms of residential buildings which can be assembled in a few weeks or even days and also repaired. This method would entail an ecologically more sustainable form of construction and a significant improvement in the quality of life for the urban environment without months of disruption from noise pollution and dirt in the surrounding areas.

Living space is becoming scarcer. How will this affect architecture?

We will transfer many of the traditional functions of our private living space to public and shared spaces. This could be communal

cooking areas, a gym, jointly used workspaces, a library or a cinema. People will live in spaces in the future with fewer square metres but ultimately have more space available to them. The shift from "square metres" to "shared metres" has many financial and social benefits.

"Shared spaces": what functions can they fulfill?

For a start, shared spaces have very tangible benefits. When guests come, the advantages are having a large kitchen, a TV room, a guest room and your own laundry room at your disposal. However, the connectivity and the sense of community are equally important. The threat of isolation and loneliness is an increasingly relevant issue in cities of the future where up to 50 percent of the population is expected to live in single households. Moreover, it is estimated that more than one-third of these single households will consist of people over 60 years of age. For this reason, we strongly need new architectural solutions to encourage human interaction.

Smart cities – creative cities: what will be the new benchmarks for urban development?

The concepts of "smart cities" and "creative cities" are often mentioned in connection with ongoing digitalisation. However, for me the only benchmark for a smart, creative city is essentially one in which the inhabitants are well connected. What is the quality of people's relationships to the environment, to their surroundings, to work, recreational activities and mobility, and also to each other? The most digital interconnectivity can do is play a supporting role in order to make our relationships to the relevant environments simpler and better, and perhaps add greater activity to these relationships.

How are we going to reside and live in the near future? For more than 20 years the trend researcher Oona Strathern has been development visions for the city of tomorrow. We spoke with her and asked her about the exciting trends which will shape our lives.



What types of mobility will characterise the city of the future?

Above all, shared electric mobility will be a game changer, supported by a wide network of chargers and effective co-mobility schemes. In addition, urban planners should not neglect the expansion of the public transport network. As studies have shown, a longer commute to work increases the number of sick days, makes people worse at their jobs and even more likely to get divorced.

Down-aging, connectivity and mobility: what could make a city more attractive for silver agers?

Cities are designed for the mythical average person – super mobile, with no disabilities, and with a cast-iron bladder. The city of the future will need to completely rethink urban concepts for older people. The World Health Organisation has initiated a campaign for designing age friendly cities and currently over 300 cities worldwide are taking part in the scheme, whereby ideas are exchanged on a range of themes from health and transport to housing and new forms of civic participation. In Singapore, for example, the elderly have smart cards that they can swipe at road crossings and thus quickly and easily slow down for a short time the speed that traffic lights change.

Will the city of the future become greener?

Living in the city has often proven to be more environmentally compatible than being in the countryside. The underlying reason is the concentration of resources, which means that we emit less CO₂ when we live in a town. A "greener" city is also extremely beneficial for psycho-social health. Skyscrapers can be equipped with spacious and stimulating green zones that still incorporate trees. The Danish landscape architect Torben Schonherr has declared that in a city, "buildings are just a detail". There is little doubt that the physical greening of the urban landscape will play a key role in the future.

Will people perhaps increasingly live in the countryside once again due to digital networking?

As with all the megatrends in our society, urbanisation will see an anti-trend. Due to the increasing population pressure in the cities, there will certainly be a shift back to the countryside, but with all the advantages and lessons gained from the cities.