

Danger lurks when world populations are warehoused

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A couple of weeks ago I ran across an article entitled [*Dizzying Pic's of Hong Kong's Massive High Rise Neighborhoods*](#). It is worth the time to Google the title and see it.

Photographer Michael Wolf has taken a number of photographs of these massive high rises, which from a distance appear to *be* colorful and even a bit beautiful.

But one look at the close-ups of these residential beasts reveals something reminiscent of 19th century slums; thousands of identical, tiny living units that reveal the same squalor that you find anywhere where people *are* living in highly dense neighborhoods. Some units have window air conditioners, other do not, probably meaning that the building itself is not adequately air conditioned, or maybe not at all. Some have laundry hanging out of the windows.

I sent this article to a colleague with a comment about the inhumanity of forcing people to live in these kinds of conditions, but this is where the more extreme of land planners believe that humankind should *be* warehoused.

Not all planners ascribe to that kind of density, of course, but they do see some degree of density as the answer to mankind's problems, environment or otherwise.

I spotted another article, this one entitled, *Lessons from West: Do Texas Land Use Laws Put Residents at Risk?* The author's premise was that poor land use regulations led to the deaths of fifteen people when a fertilizer plant in West, Texas, exploded. This study revealed that "the locations of fertilizer manufacturing and mixing plants across the western United States leads to the surprising conclusion that across the nation there are a great number of schools, nursing homes and day care centers within close proximity to these hazardous facilities."

The conclusion of this author was that in many cases the plants were initially in isolated areas, and the towns simply grew up around what was a place of employment. Better zoning might have prevented the tragedy.

The question that came to my mind was, what if those Hong Kong high rise residential buildings, or even some lesser version, had been constructed next to the plant? An absurd notion, to be sure, but there is a point to be considered here.

Fertilizer plants aren't the most prevalent threat to large numbers of people when cities are densely developed. We need only look to history of pandemics to realize that by tightly packing people together in living accommodations and mass transit, that today we greatly increase the risk of large loss of life.

Alex Santosa, wrote an article in which he describes the five deadliest pandemics in history.

The Peloponnesian War Pestilence killed 30,000 residents of Athens, Greece in 430 B.C., which was estimated to be between one third and two thirds of the population of Athens. The disease has never been identified.

In 165 A.D., the Antonine Plague killed 5 million people. During the pandemic, up to 5,000 people per day died in Rome. It was likely the Bubonic Plague.

The Plague of Justinian, also the Bubonic Plague, occurred between 541-542 AD, and it killed up to 10,000 people per day in Constantinople. Eventually, the disease took the lives of nearly half of that city's population and up to one quarter of the population of the eastern Mediterranean.

More commonly known was the Black Death, which occurred throughout Europe during the 14th century. It took 25 million lives, or about one fourth of the European population. It was also attributed to the Bubonic Plague, and this pandemic was not officially declared over until 1959. In the meantime, it took another 12 million lives in India and China.

In March of 1918, the Spanish Flu pandemic that began in Kansas eventually spread to about 1 billion people worldwide, killing between 20 and 100 million people. Santosa concluded his article by noting that this virus had been found recently by scientists in a body that had been buried in permafrost in Alaska.

There are more threats than these, including hemorrhagic fevers, SARS and cholera, just to name a few. Another pandemic could kill hundreds of millions, and it could be spread much more quickly in densely developed cities.

The other threat, of course, is from terrorism, whether it be from biological warfare or explosives. Face it, the closer people are to each other, the easier it is to kill more at a time.

Losing fifteen people in West, Texas, was a tragedy, and better land use regulations might have prevented it. But it isn't intellectual or even humane to worry about the few when our planning cities for high density will likely lead to the deaths of the many.

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