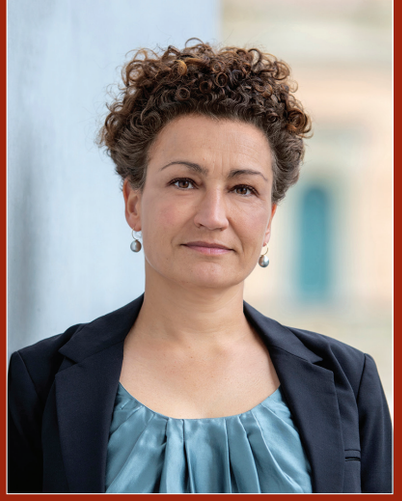

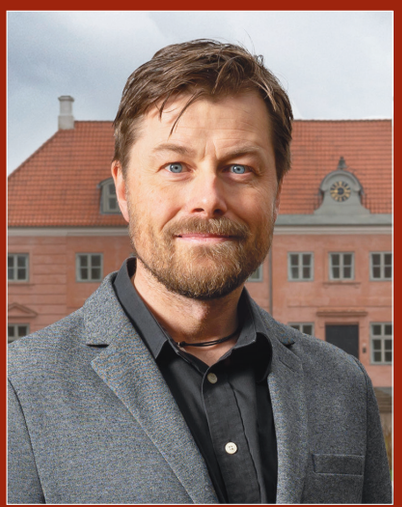

Rubina Raja & Søren M Sindbæk on...

The energy of crowds

Many archaeologists will spend a lifetime getting to grips with the complexities of just one ancient civilisation. That leaves few to explore the bigger patterns of human history. Often the grand comparative investigations and syntheses are attempted by writers coming to archaeology from other fields, with a risk that they may not fully appreciate the limits as well as the depth and complexity of the evidence.

This does not go for the work by Michael E Smith. He has dedicated a full career to the archaeology of Aztec cities in Mexico, from long-term fieldwork to careful analyses and academic syntheses. Yet he is also guided by the belief that archaeological knowledge has to be properly compared to make sense – and that it is still too rarely done. Both perspectives are evident in his new book *Urban Life in the Distant Past*, which he is not afraid to call the culmination of his career. It is certainly a seminal new statement on the way we look at ancient cities, and how we may link their archaeology with urbanism today.

We followed the book in the making, from idea to manuscript, when Smith was a visiting professor at the Centre for Urban Network Evolutions at Aarhus University, Denmark, a few years ago. He used this stay as an opportunity to gather evidence from experts working on urban sites, who were just as familiar with other ancient peoples as Mike is 'at home with the Aztecs' (the title of another book of his). Working his way systematically from office to office at the Centre, he picked the brains of junior and senior researchers alike, testing case studies of urban societies in the ancient Mediterranean, the Near East, medieval Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia – on many of which the Centre's members have conducted decade-long fieldwork and published extensively.

As a result, we now have a new and unusually broadly founded proposal, drawing on and including other scholars' published research and hypotheses, as to why large and dense human settlements have gathered so many similar characteristics as they have grown at different times in very different parts of the world. Smith scraps the long-standing ideas that cities are simply a corollary of states and bureaucracies – a lot of early urban societies evidently precede states. Nor is any large settlement a city: some early farming villages could grow to become very large settlements, but they were more like modern 'agrotowns' – nucleated farming communities rather than differentiated societies.

The secret ingredient that distinguishes urban places from other human settlements, Smith proposes, is what he calls 'energised crowding'. This is the creative and generative process that results almost by default when face-to-face social interaction is concentrated in one place. Simply by living closely together, so the argument goes, people in ancient cities would have begun to organise more complex forms of community, and found new ways to collaborate, in turn creating economic growth.

In fact, they could hardly avoid doing so. This was because of the sheer problems arising from people being concentrated. If neighbours can be a blessing, they are also a complication and – as everything from sitcoms to the news reminds us – a potential source of conflicts. Crowding has powerful social effects, not just positive opportunities, but also nuisances ranging from irritation to crime – what sociologists call 'interaction stress'. Such consequences call for more attention to be focused on finding agreements, and sometimes demand that we come up with new, more elaborate solutions, both as individuals and as groups.

We may see some of this process even in small-scale societies. Pueblo societies in the Southwestern United States in the early 2nd millennium AD, for example, often lived in communities of a few hundred people gathered in small but extremely dense, multistorey settlements. In order to cope with the inconveniences

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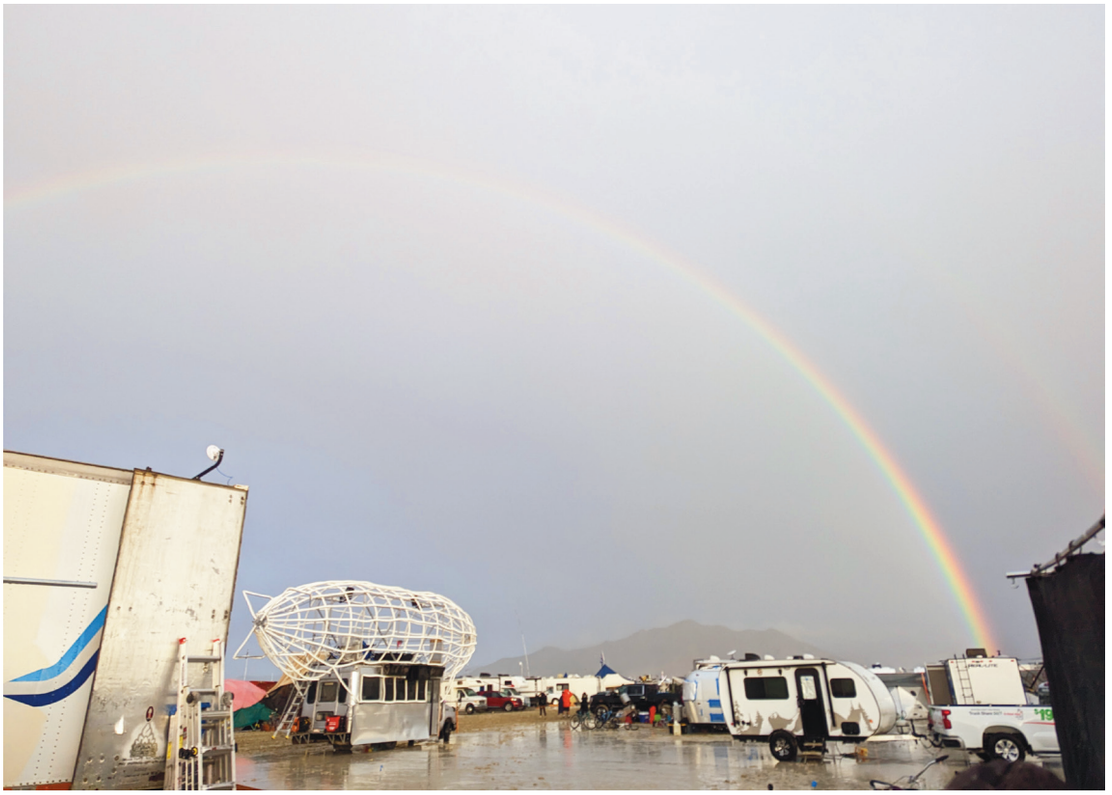

IMAGE: Cory Doctorow

LEFT Rainfall in September 2023 posed challenges for the Burning Man festival.

of living so closely, the Pueblo settlements were divided into neighbourhood groups, and had plazas reserved for communal activities, as well as specialised ceremonial structures: the round subterranean rooms known as kivas. Social structure literally grew from the prerequisite that space needed to be shared.

Desert developments

Mike's favourite example is a modern site, however, created by people with no intention of building a city. Every year in late August, crowds gather in the Nevada desert for the Burning Man festival to celebrate anarchic ideals of self-expression, self-reliance, community, and art. This is not a community to favour organised society or planning, and at present it is largely based on self-sufficiency and people camping at the site. Yet in 1996, when the festival had grown to attract more than 8,000 participants, the existing campsite became too dense. The organisers had no choice but to set up what could be considered inceptive municipal departments, and to establish a planned settlement with street grids and zoning, to keep the campsite serviceable in the years ever since.

The Burning Man community came face to face with the spectacle of interaction stress, argues Smith, in a fashion comparable to what would have happened in some ancient settlements. When Indus Valley cities acquired elaborate water-management and sewage systems in the 3rd millennium BC, for instance, we may now look to the Burning Man festival as a model to explain why. In a situation where there were no temple or royal palace institutions to organise society from the top down, the inhabitants of Mohenjo-daro or Harappa evidently faced a common need for water and sanitation. Like the participants of the Nevada festival, they would have had little choice but to build a communal organisation to solve the issue.

After the publication of Smith's book, another challenging situation occurred at the 2023 Burning Man festival. On 1 September, some days into the festival, which reportedly had more than 73,000 attendees – showing how extensively numbers have grown since the 1990s – it began to rain heavily. The infrastructure was not constructed to withstand such a deluge. Communication from the organisers and the local authorities to the attendees was reportedly mixed, with people both advised to shelter in place and told that they could leave if they wanted. People moved in unplanned ways to get away from the site; many got into difficulties when their vehicles became stuck in mud. As one can imagine, this hazard quickly comes into existence when a dry desert environment is saturated by a large volume of water.

So, while the Burning Man society features in Smith's book as an example of how energised crowding prompted a temporary society to develop in order to adapt to a 1990s crisis, recent events have shown that there is more to this picture. A significant natural event can undo such 'organisedness' and turn an otherwise orderly society upside down. The question remains: what can urban societies learn from this, as climate change impacts cities across the globe? While the consequences are felt in very different ways, a common theme is societies struggling with coping and adapting. Disaster management has surely taken a much more central role in discussions over the last decade, but management of this nature goes hand in hand with an ability to respond, and such responses require a different kind of organisation.

In this way, cities are not simply an outcome of societies. They work in their own right as 'social reactors' for their inhabitants, producing more elaborate organisation and economic growth – as well as added stress resulting from increasing interaction, with the climate as an additional consideration to be factored in. However, the essential premise remains in place: crowds gathered closely will energise interactions, which in turn need responses. ◘