

What's the Big Idea? Fix the Cities. The Rest Will Follow

By Eric Roston - May 20, 2014

When a Detroit tax lawyer was contemplating where to move in the late '60s, he decided on New York City, in part because walking was his preferred method of travel.

More than 40 years later, [Stephen Ross](#) presides over one of New York's most high-profile real-estate developers. His [Related Companies](#) built the city's Time Warner Center and [Grand Park](#) in Los Angeles. It's also the force behind [Hudson Yards](#), the epic, \$20 billion project on Manhattan's West Side that could be the biggest private real estate development in U.S. history.

Ross has identified a way to boost cities even when he's not building in them. Today he announces a \$30.5 million contribution to the Washington, DC, based think tank, the [World Resources Institute](#), to open a new research center that will be a repository for research, ideas and expertise on how to manage urban growth. The gift is the biggest windfall in the research organization's 32-year history.

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Ross's contribution to WRI is emblematic of a growing recognition among civil society groups, universities and many companies: cities are the largest entities to have both the political will and scale to address modern environmental challenges.

Today, 3.5 billion people live in cities. Within 20 years, another 1.5 billion people will join them, a challenge to city-building everywhere. "You simply can't keep doing it the way we have been doing it," said Andrew Steer, WRI's president.

Breaking news. Anyone who still hears "environmental movement" and thinks about Earth Day 1970 and VW buses filled with pot smoke is missing the story. Build better cities, the thinking goes, and climate, energy, public health and other problems will improve along the way.

National politics and dysfunction in international policy prevent top-down problem-solving, said [Ian Goldin](#), director of the [Oxford Martin School](#) at the University of Oxford. Cities are taking up the slack, becoming a global force in environmental affairs by networking themselves together.

Cities aren't a substitute for national and international governance, Goldin said. But "as a building block towards effective change on virtually anything you think about, they are extremely significant," he said.

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The new WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities will work in three main areas. It will place permanent teams in four cities to help advise city leaders and communities on everything from building codes to water management to streamlined bus systems. The center will also provide advisory services to a larger group of 30 or so cities, and build a network of 200 cities to ease sharing of expertise among them.

Ross is currently a WRI board member, along with other luminaries that include former Mexican President Felipe Calderon, Al Gore and Caio Koch-Weser, vice chairman of Deutsche Bank Group (and Daniel Doctoroff, president and chief executive officer of Bloomberg, L.P., which publishes Bloomberg.com).

It wasn't obvious from the start that Ross's career would take the path it has. He grew up in a single family home in Detroit. His first word was "car." Now, he lives and works in [Time Warner Center](#), walkable to pretty much anywhere in town. Central Park is his front lawn. Some of his experiences will be teachable, some won't.

"You can't teach taste. You either have it or you don't have it, right?" he said. "There's a responsibility as a developer that you're building something that... you will leave behind, and it will have an impact on future generations."

Clarification: This story has been updated to include Grand Park in Los Angeles among Related Companies' developments, instead of New York City's High Line, which it contributed to.

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