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May 20, 2014

Ambassador Elizabeth Cousens  
Permanent Mission of the United States to the United Nations  
799 United Nations Plaza  
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Ambassador Cousens,

On behalf of the American Institute of Architects New York Chapter and its more than 5,000 members, we write today in regard to the proposed Sustainable Development Goals on cities and human settlements by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals.

The AIA New York Chapter (AIANY) is dedicated to the health, safety, and welfare of our city. To fulfill its mission, the Chapter sponsors initiatives, programs, and exhibitions that explore topics of interest to architects, allied professionals, and the general public. Although much of our work focuses on the aging infrastructure, affordable housing shortage, and resilient building practices in New York City, AIANY also remains relevant on a global level. For example, regular programming includes lectures on density in Asian cities, transportation issues in Bogota, social housing in Spain, and waterfront development in New York City

Half of the world's population currently lives in cities, and that number is rapidly increasing. A stand-alone goal on urban environments is thus necessary to address the unique planning and design challenges facing evolving cities. Urban growth strains societies, but a set of SDGs focused on cities would address environmental quality and healthy urban environments, decent affordable housing, active lifestyles for all age groups, accessible public transport, sustainable utilities, infrastructure and urban services, urban food production and sustainable logistics, access to employment and economic opportunity, quality open space, activated, dynamic urban places, and resiliency planning. These are issues that AIANY members consider constantly in their work in New York City and all over the world. Without a stand-alone goal, sustainable cities and human settlements will not be properly addressed.

As you know, in cities, buildings and their sites exert the preponderant impact on almost every environmental metric. For example, in NYC, 94 percent of our electricity and 85 percent of our potable water is used in buildings; building energy use is responsible for 75 percent of our carbon emissions; and over half of our solid waste by weight comes from construction and demolition debris. But if the built environment is the problem in cities, they can also be the solution. In America, cities like New York, Chicago, and Seattle are leading the way with pioneering energy efficiency policies that can result in large scale reductions of energy use and carbon pollution. And a recent analysis of how NYC could achieve 80 percent carbon reductions by 2050 concluded that more than half of the necessary reductions would need to come from making our buildings more efficient.



There are many important SDGs up for consideration, but a stand-alone goal on sustainable cities is critical. It would focus attention on urban opportunities to reduce growing inequalities, protect the environment, and ensure resilience; empower urban stakeholders around practical participation; enable healthy and active lifestyles, promote integrated infrastructure design to address urban growth and equity and access to services and opportunity; promote land use planning for more efficient spatial management; ensure resilience to climate change and disaster risk reduction; and promote inclusive and participatory governance.

We must act quickly to ensure that the importance of the built environment is not lost. It will disperse if the future of our cities is determined by a general post-2015 agenda. We look forward to working with you to ensure this essential issue is represented in the final recommendations.

Sincerely,

Lance Jay Brown, FAIA

Rick Bell, FAIA