UM film aims to tackle challenges “On Cities” spurred by rapid growth

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By 2050, two thirds of the world’s population—about six billion people—will live in urban areas instead of rural or suburban neighborhoods, according to the World Health Organization.

This rapid change in migration toward inner cities, along with population growth, brings with it many challenges for developers. Access to water, pollution, and infrastructure, all become concerns that these cities must address as population density increases.

On Cities, a documentary project that debuts Monday at the University of Miami, aims to tackle many of these challenges in an unusual way.

“Traditionally we’ve done screenings at theatres, people come to it, and then go away,” said Sanjeev Chatterjee, documentary filmmaker and UM professor. “But it’s not enough to make a good film. You have to shepherd it over and over again in the public space to have some impact.”

Chatterjee’s solution: an interactive experience where the film will screen in four parts, and during intermissions a panel of experts will articulate some solutions to the issues that arise from overpopulation. The event will be livestreamed, and will be screened at 30 partner universities around the world.

“We’re calling it a ‘virtual gathering’,,” said Chatterjee.

The 28-minute film focuses on four model cities that exemplify the issues of overpopulation in terms of past, present, and future. It begins in the ancient city of Petra. Located in Jordan and built around 300 BC, Petra, which was rediscovered in the early 1800’s, is an example of a past metropolis that set itself up for failure, Chatterjee said.

The film moves on to Mumbai and Sao Paolo, current cities that are experiencing massive population spikes, and then ends with Masdar City, which is located in Abu Dhabi, Arab Emirates. This future city, which is still mostly under construction, markets itself as “one of the most sustainable communities on the planet.”
Chatterjee said events like this are just a starting point. He hopes this film will inspire students and amateur filmmakers around the world to shoot their own stories about urbanization and overpopulation.

“Now we’re talking about a multiplying effect,” said Chatterjee, who plans to launch a project next year where he’ll provide storytelling training and guidelines for students around the world and then elicit short films from them to be showcased in a 52-part series. “There are so many people running around with DSLR [cameras] who have the technical capability, but no one has sat down with them and said: what’s the story?”