***Paradoxes of the Urban***

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For over two decades I worked and lived in some of Africa and Southeast Asia’s most rambunctious city districts. These districts were constantly shifting amalgamations of plenitude and poverty, residents implanted for the long-term and others only provisionally settled. Whatever had been built reflected all kinds of temporalities and horizons as some residents were committed to making a life there no matter what, while others always hedged their bets, opportunistically, even parasitically taking whatever they could and quickly bailing out at the first signs of trouble. Everyone with ascertainable occupations always did something else to make ends meet and more, while those with no discernible jobs found ways either to live off the backs of others or to accumulate money through the proliferating cracks in territorial and institutional networks.

It was often not clear who really had money, authority, and plans and who didn’t, and roles shifted all of the time. Strong solidarities among residents could deliver the most remarkable and timely of results—such as new churches or mosques, amassed funds that could leverage opportunities for sizeable acquisitions from afar, or spirited defenses of the rights for residents to do what they had to in order to protect the wide- open heterogeneity of their district. At the same time, such cohesion could dissipate overnight; prove incapable of generating the most modest improvements in the concrete infrastructure of the area. At times these districts seemed to lack nothing, and other moments lacked everything. The intricacies of relational economies, i.e. the capacity to generate work and income through the synergistic effects of diverse backgrounds and ways of doing things operating in close proximity to each other, ensured a capacity for recalibration, for rolling with the punches of larger, macroeconomic shocks and ineptness. But they could also resemble a house of cards, seemingly erasable at a moment’s notice.

Residents relished in these contradictions and were also exasperated by them. They exuded confidence in their capacity to tinker with things, undertake small experiments to do something different with what they had at hand. For the most part, residents were both street wise and well versed in the economic and political workings not only of their cities but the larger world as well. The genealogies of how things got to be the way they were entailed rich tapestries of logics and argument. Nevertheless such an armature of explanatory tools was rarely paraded out in the everyday vernaculars of accounting for events and processes that both made complete and no sense. Few residents aspired to an analysis that attempted to mold the exuberant mess of their districts into an overarching theoretical explication. As a result, when all the things thus rendered inexplicable were accounted for, residents were usually inclined to simply say, “well, what do you expect, it is just the city, after all, and who are we to judge otherwise.”

Cities across Africa and Asia now move towards and away from each other in significant ways. No longer, if ever, coherent actors in themselves, cities as social and administrative entities, nevertheless, attempt to offer themselves as dynamic engines of economic growth and social transformation. Urbanization as a process once embodied by the city-form, now takes on varying shapes and sizes, expanding cities into megalopolises, shrinking them into shadows of former selves, or articulating a vast range of places and resources in tight relationships of interdependency.

The city is always something to be remade according to new models, new possibilities of generating value. As such, cities across Africa and Asia share the problems of producing more specular built environments, accommodating large numbers of recent and usually poor residents, and managing vast and easily bubbled property markets.

Yet, the composing of these similarities can entail very different procedures and elements. While cities and urban regions often act like unstoppable juggernauts in their pursuit of spectacular and easy profits, the messy details of how the particular spaces within them get to have the kinds of populations and characteristics they have draw upon divergent histories and day-to-day encounters. Cities are arenas of action, and they vary greatly as to how actions are considered, controlled, valued, and for whom certain actions are safe and legitimate. While cities may no longer embody the critical dimensions of urbanization, they remain powerful objects of imagination, identification, and administration.

In some cities sex is one of the few vehicles of free expression; in other cities it is full of routinized drudgery. In some cities, the household is the bastion of security and nurturance; in other cities, it may be a dangerous minefield. In some cities, vast populations are warehoused with little to do but are equipped with a basic, subsidized existence; in other cities existence is an unrelenting scramble for advantage. In some cities most residents have reasonable recourse to officials designated to manage problems; in other cities, problems are addressed simply by temporarily substituting other problems for the original ones.

The ways in which cities seem controlled, the rules and habits, the possibilities and restrictions—also tend to cover up many public secrets. They occlude ways of living that are not supposed to be taking place, but do so anyway. Most everyone knows that these transgressions are taking place. But they also know that it is more dangerous to acknowledge this reality. For many residents, lives can unfold simply by keeping one’s head down, doing what one is told, and fitting into whatever program seems to be in operation. But for others, the sheer fact that they live in a city makes such an option intolerable, and they sometimes go to great lengths to do something very different from what they are expected to do, or even expect from themselves. The various intermixtures of such action and choices make each city intensely peculiar, and piece together a patchwork reality from which it is difficult to generalize.

The relationships between the forces of global capital and the locally expressed forces of inter-meshed and messy encounters are not assignable to clearly distinct scales. It is not that global capital sits above a world of cities orchestrating its circuits below, apportioning things here and there in some kind of command control. Neither are the intermixtures of inclinations, styles, and practices that make up a local vernacular simply confined within the administrative or cultural boundaries of a specific urban region.

We know well just how wage relations, the extraction of surplus, or the hoarding of of peoples’ capacity works its way into the blood, into what may be experienced as the DNA of contemporary urban individuals. We know that the peculiarities of cities spill over their boundaries. In part, residents embody this spilling by moving across the world, making their performances visible through all kinds of media. It is also reflected in the human inclination to imitate, to coalesce on the basis of people taking things from each other. So what connects or divides cities is a moving target, something shifting all the time across and within geographical scales and times.

One thing seems for sure, however, is that African and Asia have become a powerful epicenter of global urbanization. While the youth bulge may have peaked across the world, the youth population will continue to substantially grow in Africa and South Asia for the coming two decades, which means a key challenge is the provision of work. This is particularly the case in cities largely centered on both informal and industrial labor markets, now overcrowded.

So much of urban Asia and Africa seems caught in a game of double jeopardy. The very spatial products and policies that are taking apart long-honed practices of inhabitation are now offered as the cure for their loss. Customary land arrangements, public guarantees, forms of tenancy and land and building use give way to condominiums, shop-house complexes, and all-in-one sub-cities, almost always fully sold in advance of completion. The actual mechanisms of “full occupancy” often entail complex and shady financial maneuvers, but there clearly is a market for investments, especially on the part of a younger generation of urban residents who often are able to mobilize significant portions of the sale price up front. The peripheries of major urban regions are being filled in with both new town developments and masses of cheaply and uniformly built small housing units, as poorer residents are often evicted from both the urban core and suburban areas.

The stories behind such financial mobilization are often varied. So from Lagos to Jakarta to Kolkata how such money is actually placed on the table derives from vast mixtures of the licit and illicit, from savings to borrowing on future earnings, from the marketing of goods and services on and off the books. In other words, this finance comes from an “urban economy” that does not necessarily become less diverse as the destinations of its proceeds may become more standardized. The extent to which the histories of investment producing what has been called the *consolidation of urban space* can actually diversify the surface homogeneity of spaces which its produces remains to be seen. For example, can the masses of low-cost peripheral housing actually ever turn into functional urban districts replete with jobs and other amenities?

But even in cities where transitions are happening quick and dirty, where real estate restages piracy at the high seas and speculation becomes a national pastime, conditions now on the ground are more uneven and volatile than the consolidation story would seem to make them. This is not so much a matter of the persistence of particular places and practices. It is not the resistance specific populations to change their behaviors or simply the desperation of the marginalized—whether they are the long-term poor, a fallen middle class, or youth with no employment prospects. Rather, the intersections of cut-throat competition over the rapid acquisition and development of land, the intensity of the sense of urgency shared by all kinds of inhabitants to do something quickly to improve their prospects, and the often murky ways in which land can become embedded in a thicket of bureaucratic statuses produce different kinds of voids, leftovers, and transition spaces. The overarching story of consolidation may promise that such spaces eventually will be folded in, remade, swallowed up, but for now it is difficult to tell for sure where they are headed, let alone what they actually are.

Current trajectories of urban change take apart interwoven relations of proximity, economic livelihood, local collaboration, mutual witnessing, give and take, and a spirit of opportunism based on *both* sharing and theft. They also take apart spaces physically next to each other that had some kind of linkage no matter the character of the boundaries that divided them, even if transgressing the divides was the only available option. As such, the rush to parcel, to sort, to covert space to property, to maximize ground rent, and to claim turf may generate spatial products that sweep across cities and their growing extensions. But they also, as disentangling machines, produce all kinds of interstices, vague and sometimes troubling vacancies, and wastelands. Sometimes these spaces are situated in conditions that make them costly or impossible to do anything with; other times, they are remnants of disputes that never seem to end, or of uncertain legal status.

Sometimes they are small pockets seized upon and held in to extort compensation or benefit, not now, but in some undetermined future. At other times, these vague spaces simply exist as the concrete manifestations of the difficulties entailed in drawing lines among all of the disparate sales, remaking, and developments taking place. They also reflect the fights among investors, politicians and bureaucrats over the “cuts”, the rules, the uses, or the jurisdictions involved.

For example, take a city like Phnom Penh, or Ho Chi Minh City or Bangkok, and pick one of the many possible roads at the near-periphery, particularly where the history of what is happening is difficult to read, at least if you just observing things from the ground, and are not equipped with voluminous records of land transactions, spatial planning, or development agendas. For several years I have been following such lines in different Asian cities. On one particular single road in Phnom Penh, weeks of small talk with anyone who was around at the time indicate that each of them would want something else to happen than what existed at the moment in the place where the conservations took place. Some didn’t want an improvised market across the street; some didn’t want the line, the road, to simply end at the gate of an underutilized factory; some didn’t want the plot next door to be full of discarded materials; some didn’t want their place simply to be a vacant lot in which to park a car or two; some didn’t want a large field to remain fallow in anticipation of a housing development that had already experienced three false starts and; some didn’t want the vast mega-complex near completion some 700 meters south of the road.

The restructuring involved in today’s consolidation of urban space as the maximization of land rent is not seamless. It is replete with scams, short-cuts, cost-cutting measures, broken agreements, messed up contracts, plans gone wrong, and fights within and between municipal and state ministries, architecture firms, consultancies, contractors, property developers, construction firms, planners, local and prospective residents. The power of money, imaginaries of efficient cities and middle class norms may often trump all of these messy situations, but the process of consolidation itself remains messy and fraught with unanticipated twists and turns.

There is a pervasive paradox then in the extent to which social solidarity and purportedly informal urban practices, places and economies usually seen as plagued with too much work, too much corruption and bad environmental effects continue to provide productive and affordable residential and commercial settings for large numbers of urban dwellers. While, on the other hand, the purported scale efficiencies and regulatory proficiencies of large-scale integrated development end up being replete with fiscal manipulations, a constant change of plans, and a lot of wasted time.

This is a paradox where the urgency to fix things, to deal with the massive remaking of urban infrastructure necessary to both lessen the destructive ecological footprints of contemporary modalities of urban development and to survive the rapidly changing ecological conditions of cities themselves, make states and their array of corporate and multilateral partners pursue highly formatted procedures of sustainability. Where what is actually needed is attention to experimenting with the singularities of each city—the various ways in which different ways of life, histories, economic capacities, and cultural memories interact. Such experiments are necessary in order to work out the vast implications on everyday life that will ensue from climate change and urban expansion, even if cities are able to come up with the money to fund infrastructure change.

So the question is how to inhabit these paradoxes, how to open up space for new political imaginations of urban work.

*Re-description*

One particular tool that might be useful is the notion of *re-description*. How can particular spaces, built environments, or ways of living be strategically re-described, not as elements or evidence of particular principles, macro-forces or structural arrangements, but as aspects of what *might be*. This is not a matter of imagination, fantasy, or forward visualization but re-describing existent conditions as components of something that might be taking place *right now.* But we cannot see it because we think about and talk about it only in a limited way.

The details of how many, perhaps most, residents in urban Africa and Asia attempt to live reveal unwieldy and often violent natures that push and pull people and materials in all kinds of directions, throwing them off balance and thus into a lifetime of half-baked compensations. But are they also something else?

When I step out of my house on a small lane in a very heterogeneous district in Jakarta and turn the corner into a busy street, I step into the midst of a seemingly interminable argument between two storekeepers over whose responsibility it is to make sure that the trash container doesn’t overflow. I step into two young men who voluntarily sweep the streets for several hours every morning in order to strike up quick conversations with people waiting for transportation to go to work. I step into the beginning and endings of furtive couplings in the cheap by-the-hour hotels and the same convocation of customers at the small eating places where they “compare notes” and plot both sensible and outrageous conspiracies to elevate their incomes. I step into the lining up of devotees in front of the shabby office of a major local politician who moonlights as a spiritual advisor. I step into the constant loading and unloading of trucks that in the frenzy always deliver goods to “wrong” destinations. I am immersed in the constant milling about of people of all ages seeming to wait for real responsibilities but who nevertheless feed the street with eyes and rumors. I witness the daily appearance of some new construction or alteration, of something going wrong and being left unfixed for only seconds or decades. I live amongst battered or bored lives going about pursuing the same routines and routes, as well as those who approach this street where they have spent every day of their lives as if it were this first time.

These multiple encounters and parallel, separated enactments, neither “good” nor “bad” are the substrate inhabiting this popular district. They are its real politics, even as hierarchies of authority and institutions are also obviously in place. Each has an impact upon each other, although what it might be may not be easily recognized. But these are the lines of connection that we might strive to see and work with.

And so in many popular working and lower middle class districts in Africa and Asia, residents do not feel they have to know everything about what everyone else is doing, where there is a limited sense of exclusion, where people can pursue highly particular agendas through provisionally connecting with all of these different kinds of collective formations, but without a sense of owing anything, or aligning agendas. It doesn’t mean there is not conflict. But what usually happens is that particular “projects”—economic activities, uses of facilities, streets, labor--spin off in different directions. This is made possible by the past history of the district and its replenishing, maintaining lots of different things going on at the same time. Multiple uses of land and the built environment thus ensue. This is often one of the advantages of persistent ambiguities in the status of land, of not defining once and for all who land belongs to or what it can be used for. The heterogeneity of residents and their activities requires an area where things are not consolidated or pinned-down—and, even today, certain areas of cities forego the possibility of making a great deal of money to keep this game of parallel lives going. Everything a resident or activity might be at a certain time is re-described into something else.

*Resonance*

Another conceptual tool for dealing with the urban paradox is resonance. Resonance is the process of people, materials, and places “feeling each other out”, of offering possibilities of of associating with each other, of having something to do with each other, of acting as components in the enactment of operations larger than themselves and their own particular functions and histories. When things resonate with each other there is a connection that proceeds not from the impositions of some overarching map or logic, but from a process of things extending themselves to each other.

There is much about urban life that tends to block off such resonances. Part of the seemingly constant re-doing of urban life, its inherent restlessness, pushing and shoving people and things around stems from an ongoing obsession with redemption. Here the inheritances of the past now to be remade, preserved or effaced in the present need to be redeemed, almost like a book a “green stamps” avidly collected over weeks and years, placed along grids to the end of the book (“road”) and then turned over for cash. Whatever something is now only conceals its “real” value, determinable only later on.

There is also a spiritual dimension at work. It is as if the mistakes of the past—all of the wrong moves, policies, enmities and convictions—can be cleansed of their connotations and instead point to a new existence where all is forgiven. For cities have long been sites of redemption. They signal the possibilities of starting over, of keeping the past in view as the justification for what a people have become. Nothing then stays the same or changes as the past seems to point to a process of constant ruination. In trying to redeem the waywardness of the past a horizon must appear whose primary function is to make other possibilities recede.

Redemption is at work in today’s realization that urbanity itself may be its own undoing. That the footprints of industrial production and mass consumption are the city “walking all over itself”, as if all of the uprooting, dispossession, disciplining, and frenzy that went into rendering life urban carried with it a pervasive sense of guilt or glee that has to be redeemed into virtuous splendors that do little justice to all the costs entailed. So intensifying urban processes—through design, engineering, fantasy, speculation—become the only means to get ourselves out of the mess we are in. The city attempts to redeem itself by paying attention to all of the dimensions of life that it really wasn’t paying attention to before in the “microphages” of everyday life. All of the affects, inclinations, lost opportunities, the way things might have been, the passions, street intelligences, relational capacities that cities have been collecting all along are now to be redeemed into the possibility of an ongoing, sustainable life.

So governing cities increasingly relies upon the predictability of “reading” the desires and behaviors of individuals so well as to effectively intervene into their next moves—what they will buy, decide, and want.

But the more that municipal administrations attempt to employ various forms of large scale simulation, scenario planning, and big data crunching—in hopes of exploring the “deep relations” that exist among various dimensions of the city, from transportation, energy supply, municipal finance, urban productivity, and demographics, to name a few—the less these dimensions seem to resonate with each other. The less they are able to find various ways of intersecting, gathering up, or working together.

*Governing the urban*

Governance across a wide range of African and Asian urban regions certainly has gotten better according to conventional standards. It is less corrupt, is widening tax bases, offering municipal bonds, rationalizing procedures, and developing new infrastructure. However, the by-products of this improvement also raise uncertain implications. The oscillating consolidations of property and the displacement of large number of poor people, as well as the incessant hunt for affordable land seem to exponentially increase the physical size of urban regions.

Take the example of China. Peri-urban villagers surrounded by farmland converted by the state into urban uses, still possessed prime land in the village, and they maximized its value by constructing high-density rental accommodation for migrants or small and medium-scale production zones. As village landlords did not pay tax to the municipal government, property management companies provided essential urban services. Villagers were usually able to retain residence inside the village since local governments sought to reduce the monetary costs of compensation with in-kind compensation that transferred land back to them to be collectively managed. This was usually done through development corporations in which villagers were shareholders. As local and metropolitan governments attain larger volumes of land under their direct jurisdiction, many existing villages are incorporated into municipal systems, as the pressure to provide low cost accommodation extends the peripheries of urbanization.

In Chongqi, shareholder corporations assembled fragmented agricultural plots, which had been contracted to village households, acquired the capital necessary for infrastructure upgrading, and then rented and sold lots to manufacturers. They manipulated a grey area of the existing law, which has subsequently been changed. Economic power, consolidated in the corporation put pressure on long-standing social support practices and networks, which had been reinforced through continuous adaptations of the available built environment. But as villagers increasingly had less land and built assets to work with and as municipal governments, under pressure to generate higher returns through the intensification of land use, expropriated larger volumes of land, the social and spatial fabric of villages becomes increasingly fragmented.

The thing is that we don’t know where such developments are headed. But it seems likely that if they are going to build upon the resourcefulness of the residents who made these places viable for redevelopment in the first place, then it is important to consider how to incorporate that kind of resourcefulness into new forms of property and daily living. How can all of new innovations in technology and science be put to work in service of this resourcefulness? How can the politics of struggle, of creating opportunities be threaded with a larger sense of generosity, care and mutuality? An important role for public policy then is how institutions can effectively pay attention to the logics and dynamics of this resourcefulness in order to creatively animate a broader public awareness of the larger issues concerning the relationships between justice, redistribution, climate adaptation and infrastructural change. The key is how to concretely draw lines of connection between places and people that do not seem to belong together and to open up our assumptions about how people and their collective struggles are supposed to act, and to constantly be on the look-out for new ideas and practices, often found where we least expect them. Something that surpasses the old antagonisms and labeling, that is willing to risk sitting down in rooms and dealing with the often tedious and awkward procedures of trying to find common ground among those who would seem to have nothing in common.