

## HIGH WIRE ACTS: KNOWLEDGE IMPERATIVES OF SOUTHERN URBANISMS

**Edgar Pieterse**

(University of Cape Town)

*Edgar Pieterse plies his craft at the African Centre for Cities (ACC) in Cape Town. In this essay, he reflects on a number of contemporary debates in urban studies. He argues that at the core of these debates is the question of the political in emergent cities of the South. These debates are happening at a contradictory moment. On the one hand, increasingly retrogressive and exclusionary forms of governmentality and urban management remain pervasive. On the other hand, and after more than two decades of unbridled neoliberalism, an unprecedented opportunity to recast imaginaries about longer-term futures that are more inclusive and just is at hand.*

“to remain on the wire, you have to continually shift from one condition of instability to another...”<sup>1</sup>

This intervention is a reflection on the emergent knowledge experiment that is the heartbeat of the African Centre for Cities (ACC) where I ply my craft. This allows me to reflect on a number of contemporary debates in urban studies; debates that both shape and recast the plethora of research and practice orientations of ACC. At the core of

<sup>1</sup> Gregory Bateson, quoted in Mostafavi, M. (2011) “Why Ecological Urbanism? Why Now?” in M. Mostafavi and G. Doherty (eds) *Ecological Urbanism*. Boston: Harvard University Graduate School of Design & Lars Muller Publishers, p. 44.

these debates is the question of *the political* in emergent cities of the South because at ACC we explicitly seek to address so-called applied urban development questions but in a reflexive and theoretically informed manner.

Awareness is dawning that cities will have the shoulder the responsibility to achieve a much more resource efficient global economy by that magical point of futurity—2050—as conjured by the International Panel Climate Change (IPCC) work reflected in the Kyoto Protocol on reducing carbon emissions. The imperative for radical reduction in carbon emissions presents an opening to pose some fundamental questions about the drivers, patterns and distributional effects of contemporary patterns of urbanization. But this imperative coincides with a contradictory moment: on the one hand increasingly retrogressive and exclusionary forms of governmentality and urban management remain pervasive, and on the other hand, an unprecedented opportunity to contest and recast imaginaries about longer-term futures that are more resilient, inclusive and just is more possible to project than has been the case over the past two decades of unbridled neoliberalism.

ACC has just turned five years of age, having been established in early 2008. Since then the scope and breath of the organisations’ research has grown tremendously but more or less within the conceptual parameters that were developed right at the outset.<sup>2</sup> In our early formulation we posited five propositions

<sup>2</sup> Parnell, S., E. Pieterse and V. Watson (2009) “Planning for Cities in the Global South: A Research Agenda for Sustainable Human Settlements”, *Progress in Planning*, 72(2): 233-241.

as guide posts for how we would grow the research agenda and sensibility of ACC:

One, the available stock of urban and planning theory are largely unsuited to help us understand and navigate the complex lived realities of cities in the global South.<sup>3</sup>

Two, building an alternative planning praxis rooted in the South demands a progressive value base that is both socially and ecologically informed. The concept of universal socio-economic and environmental rights offers a profound moral base for planning, but its application in cities of the global South needs interrogation.<sup>4</sup>

Three, relevant theory must be built on ‘empirical’ and analytical work about real-life experiments in city building, whether in the form of official government programmes or the mundane ordinary practices associated with reproducing livelihoods and ‘lifeworlds’ in the city. The gravitational point of focus, particularly in the field of planning theory, has shifted too far to the process end during the past two decades, leaving the material basis of urban exclusion obscured and under-theorised.

Four, effective urban policies can only emerge out of the deliberate articulation of appropriate theory and real-life data about trends, practices

<sup>3</sup> Watson, V. (2009) “Seeing from the South: Refocusing Urban Planning on the Globe’s Central Urban Issues”, *Urban Studies*, Volume 46(11): 2259–2275.

<sup>4</sup> This aspect is elaborated in: Parnell, S. and E. Pieterse (2010) “Realising the ‘right to the city’: institutional imperatives for tackling urban poverty”, *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research*, 34(1): 146–162.

and conflicts in the city. This implies an explicit and formalised system of storing information and bringing theoretical and applied knowledges into academic purview.

Five, none of the previous propositions can be addressed in a traditional disciplinary fashion; engaged theory and theoretically informed reflexive policy requires an interdisciplinary platform for knowledge generation and innovation. Learning how to become this platform at the University of Cape Town is the core purpose of ACC.

Key to the advancement of this standpoint was a belief in fostering live laboratories of knowledge *co-production*. This was premised on the assumption that academic knowledge was inadequate to understand, disentangle and “solve” a variety of tough urban problems such as structural poverty, environmental vulnerability to flooding, sprawl, climate change impacts, and so on. In fact, mongrel knowledges were required that emerged through structured and choreographed processes of co-production sustained over a substantial length of time, i.e. 2-3 years. We have now come to the end of the lifespan of some of the CityLabs, which offers an occasion to reflect on the implications for our original framing propositions.<sup>5</sup> At the same time we have also been establishing and anchoring a number of pan-African and global South knowledge networks on specific urban topics such as urban food security,

5 Anderson, P., M. Brown-Luthango, A. Cartwright, I. Farouk, W. Smit (2012) “Brokering communities of knowledge and practice: reflections on the African Centre for Cities’ CityLab Programme.” Unpublished paper. Cape Town: African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town.

the informal economy/sector, planning education and research, national urban policies and discourses, and cultural-spatial readings of emergent forms of cityness. Significantly these have all demanded and involved intense processes of interdisciplinary negotiation and co-production; and in some cases, the co-production extended well beyond the academy to include social movements such as Slum Dwellers International (SDI), and various informal worker movements enrolled in Women on Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).

Looking across these diverse and often provocative experiments in knowledge production to both elucidate and address tough urban problems associated with the widespread social and environmental neglect that accompanies “slum urbanism”, a number of questions present themselves: Is there any point to all this effort in light of the grim readings of the urban condition as articulated by authoritative voices such as Mike Davis and David Harvey?<sup>6</sup> Or, to put it more precisely, is there any point to “applied” urban scholarship if one dares to consider the probability of the decidedly dystopian outlooks on urban futures offered by Davis or Harvey? Do our modest and discrete interventions—usually in a mode of co-production—attached to a thematic topic add up to anything meaningful in the larger scheme of structural urban change? Do these grounded investigations elucidate something significant about the specific ordinariness of urban contexts across cities of the South that can help us discern a novel theorisation of emergent urbanisms? Let me briefly turn

6 Davis, M. (2010) “Who will build the ark?” *New Left Review*, 61 (Jan-Feb): 29-46; Harvey, D. (2008) “The Right to the City”, *New Left Review*, (September-October): 23-40.

to the question of dystopian readings of the urban present and future.

## LOOKING INTO THE ABYSS

From the outset it was clear that ACC would have to balance itself on the rising discursive tide of urban sustainability. By 2008 the urban dimensions of the larger climate change debate and development agenda was becoming rather obvious and widely recognised.<sup>7</sup> For a moment it seemed as if this agenda was offering a backdoor for a much earlier set of discourses on sustainable development to finally make some impact after two decades of “green-washing”. In the larger development industry there was an unmistakable relief and buzz that a new *raison d’être* for the “business” had been established that allowed for the dusting off and recasting of a plethora of humanist and “alternative development” tropes of the 1990’s and early 2000’s.<sup>8</sup> Characteristically, Mike Davis sweeps in and spoils the party. In an unusually provisional tone, yet hard hitting piece in *New Left Review*, he throws down the following gauntlet for the climate change “believers” that wishes fundamental change on the horizon. Davis opines,

7 Kamal-Chaoui, L. and Robert A. (eds.) 2009. *Competitive Cities and Climate Change*. Paris: OECD publishing; Satterthwaite, D. (2011) “Surviving in an Urban Age”, in Burdett, R. and Sudij, D. (eds) *Living in the Endless City*. London & New York: Phaidon Press.

8 McMichael, P. (2009) “Contemporary contradictions of the global development project: geopolitics, global ecology and the ‘development climate’”, *Third World Quarterly*, 30(1): 247-262.

Of course, there would still be treaties, carbon credits, famine relief, humanitarian acrobatics, and perhaps the full-scale conversion of some European cities and small countries to alternative energy. But worldwide adaptation to climate change, which presupposes trillions of dollars of investment in the urban and rural infrastructures of poor and medium income countries, as well as the assisted migration of tens of millions of people from Africa and Asia, would necessarily command a revolution of almost mythic magnitude in the redistribution of income and power. Meanwhile we are speeding toward a fateful rendezvous around 2030, or even earlier, when the convergent impacts of climate change, peak oil, peak water, and an additional 1.5 billion people on the planet will produce negative synergies probably beyond our imagination.<sup>9</sup>

It is very difficult to step away from this polemic and not be haunted by the profound “truth” of this injunction... That is to say, all the evidence of double-talk, governmental inertia, rising emissions above the worse-case scenario trend line of the IPCC confirm that the powerful vested interests that dominate global politics and economics are simply not going to come close to doing what is nominally required to meet the “modest” ambitions of the international community as reflected in the Kyoto protocol.<sup>10</sup> A

<sup>9</sup> Davis, op cit., p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> The work of the International Panel on Climate Change is clear that if the world is to avoid a 2 degrees rise in temperature, carbon emissions will have to be cut by half of current levels by 2050, which further implies an 80% cut by developed nations. This means that a low-carbon future is simply a non-negotiable even though

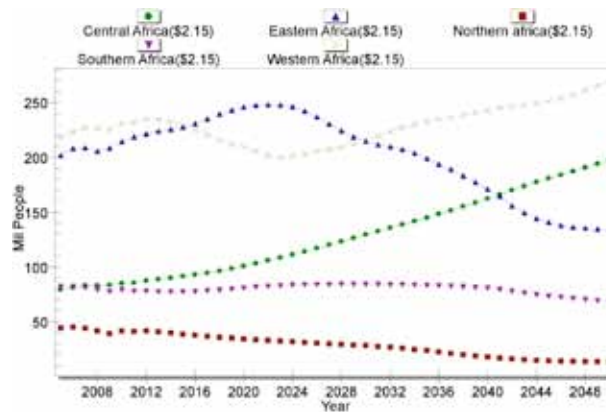


Figure 1: Population below the \$2.15 poverty line\*

\* Data from the International Futures model of the Pardee Centre and Institute for Security Studies (ISS). Data supplied to the author by the ISS on 25 August 2011.

scenario simply rendered more dystopian by the real politik peddled by emerging powers such as China.

If one then overlays this bleak assessment of the environmental agenda with the Marxian diagnosis of David Harvey, read alongside the profound economic crisis of the 2008-9 and all of the ultra conservatism that it induced, a deep pessimism is almost unavoidable. Add to this the predictive work coming out of the *Africa 2050* diagnosis which demonstrates that even with robust economic growth over the next few decades, large-scale income poverty and material deprivation will remain the norm for very large proportions of the population in most African countries. Figure 1 and 2 reflects the

how we will achieve these reductions remain a mystery given the current patterns of real politik. For an insightful overview on the imperatives of a low-carbon future, see: Flavin, C. (2008) “Building a low-carbon economy”, in L. Starke (ed) *State of the World 2008: Innovations for a sustainable economy*. London: Earthscan.

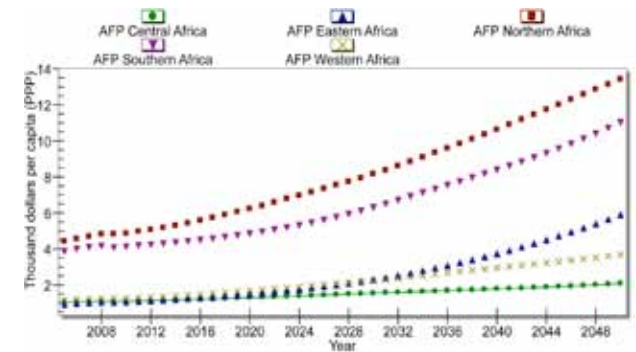


Figure 2: Projected GDP/capita per region, 2000-2050

International Futures model on income poverty and GDP/capita for different African regions between 2000-2050.

Contemplating the prospect that by 2050 at least 730 million Africans will still attempt a life on less than two dollars a day is not only sobering but also dispiriting. As intimated before, this projection assumes that the current dynamism across African economies will more or less remain on track given the feeder function of these economies into the combustion of the high growth economies across the global South.<sup>11</sup> It is then not that surprising

<sup>11</sup> Africa is the only world region that will continue to have a robust population growth momentum by mid century. In particular, East and West Africa will more than double its populations from 250 million to almost 700 million respectively. Over that period of time, Africa’s share of the global population would have grown from 15 percent in 2010 to 23 percent in 2052. However, despite this dramatic increase in its share of the global population of 9 billion, it will remain largely peripheral in economic terms. In 2010, Africa accounted for 3.5% of global exports and slightly less of FDI. This merely grows to 5.8% of exports and 5.3% of FDI by 2050. See: Cilliers, J., Hughes, B. and Moyers, J. (2011) *African*

that UN-Habitat projects that the majority of urbanites in sub-Saharan African cities will remain slum dwellers for the foreseeable future. Swilling and Annecke concur with the diagnosis of a pending polycrisis as suggested by Davis and delineate the following dimensions of it: eco-system degradation, global warming, oil peak, rising inequality, urban poverty, rising food insecurity, and increasingly unviable levels of primary resource (biomass, fossil fuels, metals, and industrial and construction materials) consumption.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst Mike Davis and David Harvey are drawing our attention to the ineluctability of a truly grotesque and brutal urbanism, Ash Amin strikes a completely different note in his recent challenge to the planning discipline. Amin, building on his work with Nigel Thrift, suggests that while the stakes have been rising in terms of the futures of social life, political vibrancy, security and risk, progressive academics have retreated into a discursive safe heaven where the only politics that really matter is: “process” or deliberative democracy. He puts the challenge in these provocative terms:

Their [deliberative planners] emphasis, instead, falls on motivating visions, scenarios, and diagrams of possibility placed under democratic scrutiny. The strategic role of the planner is not to draw up a plan for implementation, but to offer a vision, to map alternatives. I wonder, however, if

*Futures 2050: The next forty years.* ISS Monograph 175, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapters 2 and 3 in: Swilling, M. and Annecke, E. (2012) *Just Transitions: Explorations of sustainability in an unfair world.* Cape Town & Tokyo: UCT Press and United Nations University Press.

something has been lost of the knowing tradition in this otherwise laudable attentiveness to urban complexity and multiplicity; a certain programmatic clarity over the overall aims and priorities of urban living, made all the more necessary in a context of radical uncertainty. [...] Has the attentiveness of deliberative planners to procedures of decision-making compromised the necessity to know about substantive matters of urban change and wellbeing?<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Amin does not address himself directly to the prognosis of Davis and Harvey, but in his challenge to the deliberative democratic current that has come to dominate planning theory, he allows us to think from a different angle. In order to make sense of these opposing sensibilities—one suggesting large-scale interminable misery and the other intimating a real prospect for projecting substantive alternatives to effect change—I need to step back and take in a larger debate on the knowledge foundations of theoretical perspectives on the nature of emerging urbanisms in the global South. This will also help to reread the necessarily naïve plodding away at specific urban problematics that characterise ACC; a practice that we believe is a vital step in a propositional vein. The next sections offer an account of how to map and inhabit the theoretical landscape of contemporary urbanism as it resonates in the global South but certainly flowing from and to multiple directions.

<sup>13</sup> Amin, A. (2011) “Urban planning in an uncertain world”, in G. Bridge and S. Watson (eds) *The New Blackwell Companion to the City.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 637-8.

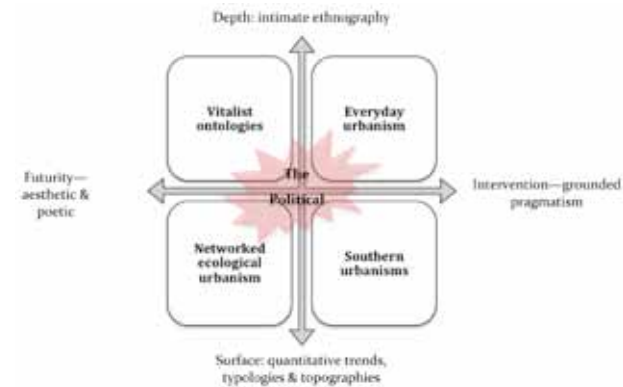


Figure 3: Critical Urban Theory Landscape

## EMERGENT KNOWLEDGES ON THE URBAN

Western-centric urban theories are now thoroughly untenable in the wake of postcolonial critiques that have masterfully demonstrated the partial, biased and imperious assumptions embedded in the DNA of these edifices.<sup>14</sup> However, these moves to render cities specific on their terms has also had a liberating effect on the study of cities in the North, most

<sup>14</sup> Edensor, T. and Jayne, M. (2011) “Introduction: Urban theory beyond the West”, in T. Edensor and M. Jayne (eds) *Urban Theory beyond the West: A world of cities.* London & New York: Routledge; Robinson, J. (2006) *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development.* London: Routledge; Roy, A. (2008) “The 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory”, *Regional Studies*, 43(6): 819-830; Roy, A. (2011) “Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35(2): 223-238; Watson, V. (2003) “Conflicting rationalities: implications for planning theory and ethics”, *Planning Theory & Practice*, 4(4): 395-407. Watson, V. (2009), op cit.



notably captured in the theoretical manifesto of Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift in their *Reimagining the City*. It is exactly at the intersection of scholars working on Northern cities with a non-teleological and emergent ontology that shared concerns are found with theorists attempting to bring the specificity of emergent urbanisms in the South into the frame. This is an exciting and productive development. In this section I want to take some time to explicate a theoretical landscape that allow for a heterogeneous range of scholars and topics to flourish, all in service of explicating the unique dimensions, folds, temporalities and emergent pathways of ordinary cities.

### FIELD 1: SOUTHERN URBANISMS

In one sense, the entry point for acknowledging the field of Southern Urbanisms is the sheer demographic momentum that is not only driving the growth of existing and new cities, but also effectively eclipsing the centrality of traditional Northern megacities in both the imaginary and economics of the urban. Of course, this demographic shift is the primary preoccupation of urban policy institutions such as the UN-Habitat, Cities Alliance, sections of the OECD and so on. In fact, an ever increasing number of volumes are appearing that seek to connect the demographic fact of urban intensification with the variety of socio-economic and ecological problems that it will leave in its wake given weak state capability, inadequate infrastructure systems, and limited planning capability. This developmentalist literature is increasingly being reinterpreted and extended to tell a very compelling story in the parlance of global capital about the fact that the future of wealth generation lies in the cities of the

### Top 25 hot spots by 2025

Cityscope 2025 city rankings

**Bold text** Developing regions  
Normal text Developed regions<sup>1</sup>

Rank	GDP <sup>2</sup>	Per capita GDP <sup>2</sup>	GDP growth <sup>2</sup>	Total population	Children <sup>3</sup>	Total households	Households with annual income over \$20,000 <sup>4</sup>
1	New York	Oslo	Shanghai	Tokyo	Kinshasa	Tokyo	Tokyo
2	Tokyo	Doha	Beijing	Mumbai	Karachi	Shanghai	New York
3	Shanghai	Bergen	New York	Shanghai	Dhaka	Beijing	London
4	London	Macau	Tianjin	Beijing	Mumbai	São Paulo	Shanghai
5	Beijing	Trondheim	Chongqing	Delhi	Kolkata	Chongqing	Beijing
6	Los Angeles	Bridgeport	Shenzhen	Kolkata	Lagos	New York	Paris
7	Paris	Hwasong	Guangzhou	Dhaka	Delhi	London	Rhein-Ruhr
8	Chicago	Asan	Nanjing	São Paulo	Mexico City <sup>5</sup>	Mumbai	Osaka
9	Rhein-Ruhr	San Jose	Hangzhou	Mexico City <sup>5</sup>	New York	Delhi	Moscow
10	Shenzhen	Yosu	Chengdu	New York	Manila	Mexico City <sup>6</sup>	Mexico City <sup>6</sup>
11	Tianjin	Calgary	Wuhan	Chongqing	Tokyo	Rhein-Ruhr	Los Angeles
12	Dallas	Al-Ayn	London	Karachi	Cairo	Paris	São Paulo
13	Washington, D.C.	Edinburgh	Los Angeles	Kinshasa	Lahore	Kolkata	Seoul
14	Houston	Charlotte	Foshan	London	São Paulo	Lagos	Chicago
15	São Paulo	San Francisco	Taipei	Lagos	Kabul	Osaka	Milan
16	Moscow	Durham	Delhi	Cairo	Buenos Aires	Dhaka	Mumbai
17	Chongqing	Ulsan	Moscow	Manila	Luanda	Tianjin	Cairo
18	Randstad	Washington, D.C.	Singapore	Shenzhen	London	Shenzhen	Hong Kong
19	Guangzhou	Boston	São Paulo	Los Angeles	Los Angeles	Moscow	Taipei
20	Mexico City <sup>6</sup>	Belfast	Tokyo	Buenos Aires	Colombo	Chengdu	Randstad
21	Osaka	New York	Shenyang	Rio de Janeiro	Baghdad	Cairo	Shenzhen
22	Philadelphia	Grande Vitória	Xi'an	Tianjin	Shanghai	Rio de Janeiro	Istanbul
23	Boston	Canberra	Dongguan	Paris	Paris	Wuhan	Delhi
24	San Francisco	Seattle	Mumbai	Jakarta	Jakarta	Los Angeles	Buenos Aires
25	Hong Kong	Zurich	Hong Kong	Istanbul	Istanbul	Buenos Aires	Madrid

Figure 4: Top 25 cities by various categories in the 2025<sup>7</sup>

\* Dobbs, R. et al (2011) Urban world: Mapping the economic power of cities. Boston: McKinsey Global Institute.

global South. A think piece by the Boston Consulting Group points out that urban consumers in Northern cities will only grow by about 100 000 million people by 2030 compared to a growth pool of 1.3 billion in cities of the global South.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, McKinsey Global Institute has been hard at work at setting the pace in becoming the “thought leader” on what the urbanization opportunity actually means for the investment priorities and geographical orientations of multinational corporations. An emblematic example of this worldview is the following table from their recent report, *Urban World*:

Figure 4 demonstrates graphically that the top twenty-five cities in 2025 in terms of GDP growth will by and large be in the global South.

In contradistinction, theorist Ananya Roy suggest that there are far more important theoretical work to be done instead of simply pointing to the self-evident demographic and economic shifts underway. Instead, Roy “Seeks to articulate new geographies of urban theory.” She argues that

Doing so requires ‘dislocating’ the EuroAmerican centre of theoretical production; for it is not enough simply to study the cities of the global South as interesting, anomalous, different, and esoteric empirical cases. Such forms of benign difference-making keep alive the neo-orientalist tendencies that interpret Third World cities as the heart of darkness, the Other. [Instead,] It is argued that the centre of theory-making move to the global South; that there has to be a recalibration of the geographies of authoritative knowl-

15 Jin, D. (2010) *Winning in Emerging Market Cities. A Guide to the World’s Largest Growth Opportunity*. Boston: Boston Consulting Group.

edge. As the parochial experience of EuroAmerican cities has been found to be a useful theoretical model for *all* cities, so perhaps the distinctive experiences of the cities of the global South can generate productive and provocative theoretical frameworks for *all* cities.<sup>16</sup>

She then proceeds to provide a suggestive overview of key theoretical traditions in various Southern regions; traditions that, through genealogical excavation, can prove useful to this vital theoretical project. Roy also picks out a number of conceptual themes that has served the Southern urbanism theoretical project well. A number of volumes have appeared over the course of the past few years with the explicit intention of mapping the import and relevance of theoretical interpretations that arise from Southern contexts.<sup>17</sup> An important seam of this emerging body

16 Roy, A. (2009) *op cit*, p. 820. This injunction may be true, but the stubborn patterns of the political economy of knowledge production will mean that in practical terms more than 90% of “recognized” scholarship associated with leading journals and publishing houses will undoubtedly emanate from Northern universities. However this is a dilemma for consideration on another occasion.

17 For example: Edensor and Jayne (2011), *op cit.*; Enwezor, O. et al., (eds.) (2004) *Under Siege: Four African Cities. Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Dokumenta 11\_Platform4, Hatje Cantz; Huyssen, A. (ed) (2010) *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age*. Durham: Duke University Press; Meyers, G. (2011) *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice*. London: Zed Books; Robinson, (2006), *op cit.*; Simone, A. (2004) *For the city yet to come: Changing African life in four cities*. Durham and London: Duke University Press; Simone, A.M. (2010) *City Life from*

of work is the focus on detail, specificity, molecular urban practices, and the co-constitutive nature of plural subjectivities and harsh living conditions amidst widespread informality and precarious living conditions.

## FIELD 2: EVERYDAY URBANISMS

In contrast to the demographic, regional and epistemological interests of Southern Urbanisms, everyday urbanism seek to take subjectivity and multiple social assemblages seriously on their own terms. Over a decade ago work in this field was preoccupied with informality as a dominant context for both economic and social reproduction. Numerous studies and policy networks were mounted to generate a reasonably complete and fleshed-out account of informality, sometimes rooted in the livelihoods literature of development studies, and other times powerful ethnographic accounts associated with subaltern and/or postcolonial urban anthropology. However, much of the livelihoods oriented work remained trapped in a developmentalist instrumentality within which the real purpose of research was to understand the obstacles to formalisation, breaks on entrepreneurialism, and address those through effective policy and managerialism.

One the leading theorists in this epistemic field is AbdouMaliq Simone who has for the past three decades painstakingly documented and theorised the centrality of everyday life to a larger appropriation of the urban and cityness. In his oeuvre he has always been less interest in the preoccupation with

*Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads*. London and New York: Routledge; Swilling and Annecke, *op cit*.

informality but rather insisted that a more agnostic sensibility was required. So, for Simone,

...the point is to pursue the dogged work of trying to understand the implications of what people do, particularly as it is clear that residents, even in the desperate ways they may talk about their lives, usually think about them as more than survival alone. Yes, survival is the overwhelming preoccupation of many. But the pursuit of survival involves actions, relations, sentiments, and opportunities that are more than survival alone. It is these thousands of small excesses which also act on the city, remaking it ever so slightly into something different than it was before. These changes are not measured by any easily discernable standard that would allow one to say that the city is becoming more just, equal, cutthroat, revolutionary, messianic, or hellish. And thus the important work is perhaps simply to document these efforts on the part of the poor to give rise to a new moral universe, a sense of value, of potential, and of the unexpected to which people's attention, no matter how poor, is also paid.<sup>18</sup>

Here one can sense Simone's methodological obsession with the infinitesimal pluralism of ordinary life and aspiration, excavated on their own terms, but also with a reluctant normative intent; a recognition that values, (spiritual) practices and mores suture everyday life but these are also profoundly unstable and malleable and therefore to be understood and projected with great care and provisionality. Simone's work intersects with the suggestive

<sup>18</sup> Simone, A. (2010) op cit., pp. 38-39.

theoretical account of Asef Bayat on the cumulative impacts of mundane transgressions of space, infrastructures, and buildings as the urban poor enact survival.<sup>19</sup> Bayat suggests that we see these often non-ideological and apolitical practices as a form of encroachment or canabilization that is simply too pervasive and tenacious to be done away with or repressed through any kind of simple or complex regime of governmentality. By dint of presence and numbers, everyday acts become a shape and space-forming dynamic that lives deep in the reproductive patterning of Southern cities. In this moment, Bayat's work offers a powerful illustration of Ananya Roy's thesis that informality has become a dominant mode of urbanization of much of the global South.<sup>20</sup> These lines of argument are compatible with Solly Benjamin's theorisation of "occupancy urbanism" but arguably in a different political key than the work on "insurgent citizenship" that comes from the Latin America region.<sup>21</sup> The practices that come into view in terms of either the occupancy urbanism or quiet encroachment frames do not project rights-bearing citizens as the literature from Latin America projects.

However, reading across these contexts and theoretical genres, it is certain that an incredibly rich and protean research programme can both be

<sup>19</sup> Bayat, A. (2000) "From Dangerous Classes to Quiet Rebels. Politics of Urban Subaltern in the Global South", *International Sociology*, 15(3): 533-557.

<sup>20</sup> Roy, A. (2005) "Urban informality: towards an epistemology of planning", *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 71(2): 147-158.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, S. (2008) "Occupancy urbanism: radicalizing politics and economy beyond policy and programs", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 32(3): 719-729.

imagined and mounted across cities everywhere. However, as more and more carefully crafted, often ethnographic, accounts of everyday urbanism start to amass, it is pertinent to draw inspiration from non-representational theorists and begin to question the often human-centred assumptions of both Southern and everyday urbanism perspectives.

### FIELD 3: VITALIST ONTOLOGIES

Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift first explored the implications of a nonessentialist vitalist ontology—indebted to Deleuze and Guattari—for a rethinking of cities in their volume, *Cities: Reimagining the urban*. Lorimer explains vitalism as a "tradition in philosophy that believes in the existence of a life force in material assemblages that cannot be explained through mechanistic approaches. As an ontology, it argues for the immanent emergence of form, rather than the existence of transcendent archetypes."<sup>22</sup> This grounding is a dead give-away that the leading lights of actor-network theory such as Haraway, Latour, Law and Serres are all closely aligned with this standpoint.

In a recent intervention by Amin cited before, he reminds us that this approach induces an expansive understanding of cities and cityness:

...cities might be thought of as machinic entities; engines of order, repetition, and innovation (sparked by the clash of elements and bodies) that drive the urban experience, including what

<sup>22</sup> Lorimer, J. (2009) "Posthumanism/Posthumanistic Geographies", in R. Kitchen and N. Thrift (eds) *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. Volume Eight. Amsterdam and Oxford: Elsevier, p. 344.

humans make of themselves, others, and their environment. The urban environment is a meshwork of steel, concrete, natural life, wires, wheels, digital codes, and humans placed in close proximity and it is the rhythms of the juxtapositions and associations – coming together in symbolic projections, cultural routines, institutional practices, regulatory norms, physical flows, technological regimes, experience of the landscape, software systems – that surge through the human experience. The machinic rhythms of the city, I would argue, blend together the human and the urban condition, making people subjects of a specific kind, with their demeanor and outlook (compared to that of humans in other time-spaces) formed by their inhabitation of the urban environment and, most importantly, its inhabitation in them, fixed through these rhythms.<sup>23</sup>

This relational ontology is coupled to an affective understanding of subjectivity. Again, Lorimer clarifies that affect “refers to both material, ecological properties of a body and the forces and processes that link them together. It describes prediscursive, embodied experiences that are subsequently codified into subjective emotions.” These theoretical orientations are decidedly critical of textually oriented poststructural deconstruction on the one hand, and neo-Marxist structuralist accounts of inert and singular materialities, on the other. Instead, this relational ontology is interested in a much deeper and fuller account of how agency is enacted through particular configurations and emergences of both human and non-human actants in ways that tune into

<sup>23</sup> Amin, op cit, p. 634.

the affective dispositions of people and the atmospheres of places that they inhabit or transit.<sup>24</sup> The net effect is an account of cities that emphasises the fragility of all that seem stolid, stable, gargantuan, immutable and thoroughly routine.

An insightful example of how this ontological account offers a fresh and dynamic perspective on one of the basic elements of urban life—infrastructure—shines through in the suggestion of an “infrastructural turn” in urban theory, made by Stephen Graham. He asks of us “to consider urban infrastructures as complex assemblages that bring all manner of human, non-human, and natural agents into a multitude of continuous liaisons across geographic space.”<sup>25</sup> This approach forces an engagement with the larger economic, cultural and social roles of infrastructure discourses, rationalities and practices. In my mind, since infrastructural investments occupy central stage in the imagineering and mobilization work of urban elites across the global South, it is vital that we deploy vitalist ontologies and related insights from relational understandings encapsulated by the notion of “assemblages” to theorise more broadly about the emergent practices and consequences of city building. This, Jane Bennet argues, will open us up to look for and recognise the constitutive turbulence of materialities that on the surface may appear stable and solid.<sup>26</sup> Since turbulence

<sup>24</sup> Pieterse, E. (2011) “Grasping the unknowable: coming to grips with African urbanisms”, *Social Dynamics*, 38(1): 5-23.

<sup>25</sup> Graham, S. (2010) “When infrastructures fail”, in Graham, S. (ed) *Disrupted cities: When Infrastructure Fails*. New York and London: Routledge, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke

implies instability and risk, it also opens up spaces for problematizing taken-for-granted technical and financial assumptions that unpin the “technological unconscious” of cities.

Given the “incomplete” and “under-construction-ness” of cities in the South, taking on board this relational stance to reality-in-the-making and knowledge, can only contribute to a more plural and dynamic conception of city-making and cityness. More importantly, it allows us to connect the unjust and cruel pathways of our cities to a clearer set of analytical programs to speak into the challenge of proposition intimated by Amin. The notion of proposition takes me to the final field of theory building.

#### FIELD 4: ECOLOGICAL URBANISM

In keeping with a vitalist ontology and recognising the variable assemblages of actants that supports the unremitting social-natural reproduction of the city, it is clear that the central concern of a group of urbanists is turning towards the longer-term viability of contemporary models of urban development, design and material reproduction. It demands a careful and systematic consideration of multiple pathways towards alternative, more resilient and more liveable forms and modalities of habitation.<sup>27</sup> Central to this concern is an interest in the natural-social assemblages of the city as mediated by infrastructure

University Press.

<sup>27</sup> NSFWS [National Science Foundation Workshop on Urban Sustainability], (2000) “Towards a Comprehensive Geographical Perspective on Urban Sustainability.” Final Report of the 1998: National Science Foundation Workshop on Urban Sustainability.’ Rutgers University. Swilling and Annecke, op cit.



networks and the built environment. As Stephen Graham explains: “...energy, water, sewerage, transport, trade, finance, and communication infrastructures allow modern urban life to exist. Their pipes, ducts, servers, wires, conduits, electronic transmissions, and tunnels sustain the flows, connections, and metabolisms that are intrinsic to contemporary cities. Through their endless technological agency, these systems help transform the natural into the cultural, the social, and the urban.”<sup>28</sup> Similar observations can be extended to the role of the built environment as mediators and embodiments of urban functionalities, form, symbolic projection and desires of control.

Mohsen Mostafavi argues that these readings, set against a backdrop of environmental risk and crisis, open up an opportunity to project new imaginaries of alternative urbanisms. Such visions or projections should not arise from a technocratic eschewing of structural crisis, but rather stem from a perspective that views “the fragility of the planet and its resources as an opportunity for speculative design innovations rather than as a form of technical legitimization for promoting conventional solutions.”<sup>29</sup>

In mainstream, neoliberal inflected discourses, speculative design translates into an agenda about environmental security and the promise of a technological fix. An instructive development can be seen in the scramble amongst various insurance, engineering and financial service companies to understand what the investment potential and risk profile of

so-called sustainable infrastructures are. This fraction of the knowledge-driven service economy, intermarried with the engineering manufacturing sectors, coalesce to produce ecological urban utopias unmoored from the messy and leaky materialities of most places. A good example is the design conceit that is Mosdar or the proposals for similar, free floating, technological dreams of transcendence. But, in this yearning for technological remedy, rooted in reductionism, there also lies an unprecedented opportunity for developing and projecting a radically different imaginary to frame prospective ecological urbanisms. I will return to this suggestion a little later on.

Works in this epistemic field counter-balances the obsession with only the everyday; but in thinking about longer temporalities, it also remains modest and provisional by keeping in view the constitutive dynamic of uncertainty and risk; and the-always-present potentiality of unforeseen emergences and assemblages of actions. This brings me to the connective tissue between these deliberately stylised categories of scholarship.

## CONNECTIVE TISSUE

The necessarily over-simplified diagrammatic sketch suggest that on the vertical axis there is a continuum between quantitative research that can help us to understand the dimensions, patterns, and categories of city formation unfolding across the global South. This foregrounding is important because it asks of us to move beyond the obsolete pitching of qualitative against quantitative methods, especially in the wake of the poststructural and postcolonial turns. That said, it also reinforces the

idea that without much more investment in carefully crafted accounts of the intimacies of everyday lives, practices and dispositions of urban majorities, we are unlikely to deepen and evolve the emergent theorisations of everyday urbanisms. But in this recommitment, we must also embrace an imperative to broaden our ontological assumptions to really begin to look beyond, either, individual or collective agency and situate such practices in more affectively attuned accounts of various assemblages of chains of actors and emergent intensities.

The second, horizontal axis, speak to the political sensibility that arises from the movements between these overlapping and mutually enriching fields of enquiry and theoretical curiosity. On the one hand, in light of the abyss so powerfully drawn by Davis and his like, we do not give up on the possibility of being able to identify a concrete and precise politics of action and intervention; but of course, rooted in a heightened reflexivity and sense of provisionality.

At the same time, looking across this spectrum that range from a concern with pragmatic intervention in the now, there is an acknowledgement that the excess produced by the abyss, leave us yearning for answers, consolation, a basis for hope. Amidst the impossibility of political relief in philosophical terms, it is inevitable that one turns to the ethical underpinning of this political and epistemological stance: This ethics, I believe must draw its inspiration from a continuous exploration into the aesthetic and poetic dimensions of unexpected moments of beauty, generosity, invention and care within the everyday and imponderable futures... and how such futures are always met in one way or another with a determination to act; a refusal to cede ground to hopelessness and defeat. But because we are talking

<sup>28</sup> Graham, *op cit*, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Mostafavi, M. (2011) “Why ecological urbanism? Why Now?”, in M. Mostafavi and G. Doherty (eds) *Ecological Urbanism*: Boston: Harvard Graduate School of Design & Lars Müller.

about debates and questions that are beyond rational resolution, there is a vital requirement to conjure a deeper, and more affectively attuned conception of the experience of the impotence of the moment and how that experience, potentially, gives rise to a determined search to transcend; and in this it is not the transcendence that is important but rather the aesthetic and poetic “resolution” of that yearning. Crucially, in this case resolution may indeed mean an effective way of meditating on the impossibility of a “solution”. Here my interviews with artists who engage with the contemporary urban condition are instructive. These artists all suggest that the moment of resolving an art work—albeit a painting, or musical score, or poem or public art intervention—is experienced as a breakthrough. This arrival is of course a uniquely individualised moment of clarity and release—which may only play itself out in the affective realm, triggering various emotional states, but without necessarily delivering a rational understanding or clarity; yet, it *feels* like something has been resolved, allowed to unmoor itself from the weight of hopelessness, despair and pain. Moreover, for artists that I engage with on a sustained basis, when the resolution taps into a broader affective and emergent sensibility or emotional current that connects the art work, and the experiences of those who consume the work, the artistic manifestation is particularly powerful.

## ZONE OF OVERLAP: RECONSIDERING THE POLITICAL

One of the benefits of this simple diagrammatic conceptual frame to assess theorisations of the emergent urban in the South is that it forces one to recognise a variety of political moments, interfaces,

dynamics and opportunities. In this section I want to extent earlier work on a relational approach to politics that delineates a fluid and dynamic set of (potential) interactions between five domains of urban political practice: (1) representative political forums and associated participatory mechanisms; (2) neo-corporatist political forums such as the ones that develop city development strategies, which are comprised of representative organisations, typically the government, the private sector, trade unions and community-based organisations; (3) direct action or mobilisation against state policies or to advance specific political demands in the public sphere; (4) the politics of development practice, especially at the grassroots; and (5) symbolic political contestation as expressed through discursive contestation in the public sphere.<sup>30</sup>

It is striking how much of contemporary scholarship concerned with the political opportunity structure and state-civil society interface is obsessed with the “now”; with the contemporary dynamics of exclusion and differential inclusion. However, returning to Amin’s earlier injunction for a more propositional and programmatic agenda that substantively address *how* different futures could be induced, his pointed question is telling: “Is it not possible for planners to draw up an urban program without the pretensions of total vision, teleological fulfilment and systemic certitude, offering a clear diagnosis of the threats that cities face, the matters of collective concern that must be addressed, the goals that must be defended to improve urban living for the many

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<sup>30</sup> The fuller argument on this relational model of urban politics is set out in Chapter 4 of: Pieterse, E. (2008) *City Futures: Confronting the Crises of Urban Development*. London: Zed.

and not the few?”<sup>31</sup> It seems to me that the re-reading of the theoretical landscapes also offers some clues for how to transcend the obsession with the contemporary and move towards a consideration of multiple temporalities, scales, and socio-technical configurations and patterns.

In my reading of the literature on urban politics it seems that the general assumption is that neoliberal programs of urban entrepreneurship forms the context for collective struggles. These struggles are typically about “recognition” by powerful vested interests (typically urban growth coalitions) in order to “access” some basics of urban life—land, sanitation services, electricity, transportation, safety and security, affordable building materials, and so on. And in contexts where these struggles are relatively matured or marked by periodic “victories”, these material claims are increasingly connected to larger discourses about accessing “rights”. In some contexts, depending on postcolonial political traditions, the rights discourses may prefigure these material struggles and serve as a backdrop for these kinds of claim-making and encroachment. Alongside and/or before these materially-based processes of claim-making there is often a need for elementary claims to ensure the seizure or moderation of violent repression which can take the form of extortion, forced removals or the constant threat thereof, or wilful withholding of access of services when local populations are deemed to have transgressed the realm of the politically acceptable in the eyes of the state, or local power brokers.

Central to most accounts of these wide-ranging social struggles is a deep belief that (local) states are

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<sup>31</sup> Amin, *op cit.*, p. 638.

absolutely guided by a program of neoliberal governmentality. Evidence of this is provided through exhibits that demonstrate a fiscal predilection for economic boosterism projects at the expense of more equitable and just priorities. Or institutional reform measures that introduce market-based operational systems and incentives, which either manifest in the corporatisation of a municipal utility, or its outright privatisation. These kinds of reforms typically reinforce patterns of splintered urbanism and an effective withdrawal of the local state from the lives and neighbourhoods of poor citizens. Another tell-tale sign of neoliberalization of city governments is the penchant for institutional and investment reforms that fall in line with aspirations to become world class and globally competitive. It is not the focus of this paper to explore the rich literature that traces the various locally-specific adaptation and extension of basic neoliberal precepts that inform urban management.<sup>32</sup> All I want to signal is that there is now an important debate about how useful and historically accurate these taken-for-granted assumptions are about the widespread adoptions and execution of neoliberal intentionality. Here I am referring to the suggestive recent work by Jennifer Robinson and Sue Parnell on this topic.<sup>33</sup> All I want to signal for now, in the interest of space, is that this questioning

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32 Theodore, N., J. Peck and N. Brenner (2011) "Neoliberal Urbanism: Cities and the Rule of Markets", in G. Bridge and S. Watson (eds) *The New Blackwell Companion to the City*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

33 Robinson, J. and S. Parnell (2011) "Travelling Theory: Embracing Post-Neoliberalism through Southern Cities", in G. Bridge and S. Watson (eds) *The New Blackwell Companion to the City*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

is opening up a much needed clearing to understand a variety of logics, intentionality and assemblages that fractions within local states and elites are caught up in, no least of which is the force of law, in navigating the routine dynamics of city administration, management, symbolic articulation and constant ideological recalibration of highly media-driven publics. But let us hold that thought for now.

Going back to an earlier point, my central contention is that investigations into the terrain of the urban political are overly obsessed with the NOW; contemporary struggles over incredibly fundamental and crucial questions of basic protection against state (sanctioned) violence, access to essential amenities and services, and the fundamental right to simply be in the city. These are of course vital and highly relevant foci of scholarship. But, is it adequate to fully comprehend the wide-ranging surges of intent, fear, desire, aspiration, and technological imperatives that suture the variety of human and non-human assemblages that underpin the built environment and the urban social?

In light of the earlier discussion on redrawing the theoretical landscape that can inform city studies, I want to suggest that we can respond to the injunction of Ash Amin by opening a relational political field that is not only multi-scalar, but also alert to multiple folds of time that co-exist and constitute the present. For example, a decision to compete for a mega event locks a city into all manner of predetermined choices in order to comply with the stringent global standards that accompanies the paid-for "honour" to host these boosterism parties. It also changes the order of public investment priorities with a knock-on effect of probably 10-20 years, if not

more.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the continuous decision-making apparatuses that bind together municipal managers, engineers, professional bodies, academic knowledges about technological preferences and system maintenance imperatives, particular financial instruments and markets, client expectation, etcetera, lead to investment framings and priorities that carve varies lines of path-dependency. These may or may not conform to explicit neoliberal calculations, but most importantly, they are instantiated into the re-productive dynamic of the city through largely invisible and therefore unproblematised processes.

There are two kinds of routine decision-making and implementation assemblages that I would suggest need critical scrutiny. Following, Stephen Graham, the first pertains to the ubiquitous role of network infrastructures in structuring urban opportunities and potentialities for citizens of various classes and locations, firms of various sizes and sectors, and of course nature in its diverse systemic layers and intersections. The second is the built form, understood as a dynamic amalgam of land-use, transportation, built form and typologies, spatial lay-out and density.<sup>35</sup> If our political gaze would lift its eyes from the compelling immediacy of urban struggles of the poor and turn to the ways in which framing discourses and assumptions about key operating systems of the city, a series of different political claims and imaginings can present itself.

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34 Pieterse, E. (2012) "World Cup Promise & Cold Comforts for South African Cities", in Asmal, Z. (ed) *Designing South African Since 2010*. Johannesburg: DesignZA.

35 Jenks, M. and Jones, C. (2010) "Issues and Concepts", in M. Jenks and C. Jones (eds) *Dimensions of the Sustainable City*. Dordrecht: Springer.

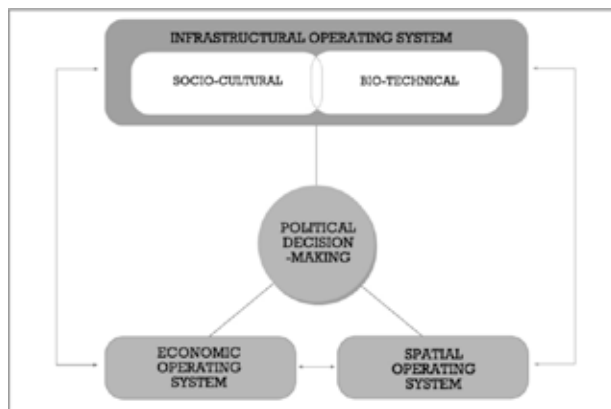


Figure 5: Operating systems of (sustainable) cities

Similarly, if we desist from only obsessing about the neoliberal betraying sign in urban managerial discourses and actually delay and deconstruct the *operating* dynamics and inter-dependencies in various infrastructural networks and assemblages, we can almost certainly draw a very different map of political openings and resistances. This implies institutional ethnographies in the nooks and crannies of bodies and decision-making forums that are often predefined as the “enemy of the poor” in our conceptual registers. (In this vein, it is important to appreciate that the rich literature on everyday urbanisms that have emerged over the past two decades need to be matched with similar accounts of the routine and often idiosyncratic and adaptive dynamics within various bureaucracies that impinge on the lives of urban majorities.)

Here I cannot go further in making the case for how we can enlarge the political. Instead, I now want to turn to a heuristic device that we had to develop to facilitate deliberation and research in various co-production settings where ACC engages the South African state at various levels: national government,

the provincial government of the Western Cape, and metropolitan governments of Johannesburg and Cape Town. The conceptual device animates the ubiquitous computer metaphor of operating systems.

### CONCRETISING STRUGGLES FOR ALTERNATIVE FUTURES<sup>36</sup>

The starting point of this programmatic thought experiment is the interlinked imperatives to progressively achieving resilient and inclusive growth. In other words, imagining and pursuing urban economic priorities, investments and production processes that can address the environmental dimensions of the polycrisis Davis warns about. However, this agenda only makes sense in relation to a series of inter-dependent transitions in other domains of social, economic and material reproduction. I want to suggest that an interest in understanding pathways to more sustainable urban dynamics requires one to think about three critical meta domains of urban transition that need to be pursued simultaneously. These domains are: sustainable infrastructure, the inclusive economy, and efficient spatial form, glued by processes of democratic political decision-making—a fourth domain. Put differently, one way of thinking about cities is that they require various “operating systems”. Figure 5 highlights three critical operating systems that apply for all cities: i)

<sup>36</sup> This section is a summary and adaptation of: Pieterse, E. (2011) “Recasting urban sustainability in the South”, *Development*, 54(3): 309-316; and Pieterse, E (2011) “Building Brave New Worlds: Design and the Second Urban Transition”, in Cynthia Smith (ed) *Design for the other 90%: Cities*. New York: Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

infrastructural, ii) economic, and iii) spatial, which implicates land-use and the built form. At the regulatory heart of these operating systems live the decision-making and regulatory force of the state and/or a plurality of powerful actors that can usurp the power of the state and/or exercise partial control.

The infrastructural operating system can further be divided between social-cultural and bio-physical network infrastructures. The latter refers to roads, transportation, information-communication technology, energy, water and sanitation, food and ecological system services that underpin the built environment and make urban life and movement possible in a concrete sense. The concept, ‘flow management’, provide a useful lens on how these infrastructures can be viewed as conductors of resource flows. “Central to the concept is the notion of flows of materials and energy, reusing resources or substituting non-renewable resources.”<sup>37</sup>

Socio-cultural infrastructures refer to the social development investments that forge identity and community, e.g. cultural services, education, health, public space, libraries, food gardens, green spaces, housing and the arts. Social infrastructures by definition need to be tailored to the molecular street and neighbourhood-scale dynamics which implies a substantial degree of community involvement and control in the execution and maintenance of these infrastructures<sup>38</sup>; critical moments of democratic

<sup>37</sup> Moss, T. (2001) “Flow Management in Urban Regions: Introducing a Concept”, in S. Guy, S. Marvin, and T. Moss, (eds) *Urban Infrastructure in Transition: Networks, Buildings, Plans*. London: Earthscan, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> For innovative examples of this in Latin America, see: Rojas, E. (ed) (2010) *Building cities: neighbourhood upgrading and urban quality of life*. Washington DC:



enrolment and citizenship enactment. To ensure such local ownership and control it is important to safeguard the capacity for local spatial literacy and purposive capacity, alongside practical community-organising skills and dense institutions.<sup>39</sup> Recent experiences from some Latin American cities such as Medellín, Bogotá and Curitiba suggest that even though social infrastructures by definition need the fine-grain of community life to truly come to life, it is also equally important for it to articulate with a city-wide system of publicness and connectivity, especially in spatially and economically divided cities. Social infrastructure investments can send a powerful signal that public infrastructures for all class and cultural groups can and should be of the same quality, especially since the poorer citizens are much more reliant on them. The work of Alejandro Echeverri and his colleagues in Medellín is a particularly good example of what I have in mind here.<sup>40</sup>

Network infrastructures on the other hand, often imply scale-dynamics that covers the larger urban system in all of its territorial expansiveness. This in turn holds profound implications for how political engagement is defined, structured and connected

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Inter-American Development Bank.

39 Johnson, H. and Wilson, G. (2009) *Learning from development*. London: Zed Books; Narayan, D. and Kapoor, S. (2008) "Beyond sectoral traps: Creating wealth for the poor", in C. Moser and A.A. Dani (eds) *Assets, Livelihoods, and Social Policy*. Washington DC: The World Bank.

40 Echeverri, A. (2010) *Urbanismo Social en Medellín 2004-2008*. Talk at 361 degrees Design and Informal Cities Conference, 22-23 October, Mumbai, India. Also see: Kimmelman, M. (2012) *A City Rises, Along With Its Hopes*. *New York Times*, 18 May. Online version. [Accessed on 25 May 2012]

downward to the neighbourhood or community-scale. In fact, as the work on splintering urbanism demonstrates, the lack of appropriate democratic oversight and engagement on 'invisible' network infrastructures produce conditions where city-wide infrastructures are tailored and routed to only service those sections of the population and economy that can contribute to the investment and maintenance of these systems.<sup>41</sup> This is undoubtedly one of the primary drivers of large-scale service deficits across cities of the South.<sup>42</sup>

The economic operating system involves production, consumption and market systems that underpin the exchange of goods and services. Importantly, these systems span formal and informal institutions and commonly involve their entanglement, especially in an era of intensifying globalization. However, one of the most challenging problems confronting cities in the South is that formal economic systems only absorb less than half of the labour force. The rest have to eke out an existence in the informal economy or completely disconnected from any gainful economic activities.<sup>43</sup> Those 'lucky' enough to engage in informal work have to put up with extremely low and often irregular income, which puts them in

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41 Graham, S. and S. Marvin, (2001) *Splintering Urbanism. Networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition*. London and New York: Routledge.

42 McFarlane, C. (2010) "Infrastructure, Interruption, and Inequality: Urban Life in the Global South", in *Disrupted cities: When Infrastructure Fails*, edited by S. Graham. New York and London: Routledge.

43 UN-Habitat (2010) *State of the World's Cities Report 2010/11: Bridging the Urban Divide*. London: Earthscan.

the category of the working poor.<sup>44</sup> In a broader context of ever deepening global integration of national economies and value chains, it is becoming more difficult for national governments to protect jobs, provide support to the working poor and induce employment because such actions are, ironically, perceived as undermining competitiveness.<sup>45</sup> And as long as the intensifying financialization of economic value generation continues apace, it will be difficult to promote labour-absorptive and equalizing economic policies.

In the face of these powerful trends, it is essential that cities find creative ways of redefining and boosting local economies in order to broaden the base of those who are included in economic life. The urban development challenge is not just about enabling the generation of more formal economic jobs. On the contrary, the biggest and most urgent challenge is to target and absorb young adults between the ages of 15-24 in various categories of social and environmental public good activities that can reconnect them to society, nature and their surroundings. Community-based ecosystem restoration and management is one pertinent example. For instance, river systems and canals in developing countries are often highly degraded because of upstream pollution and downstream neglect, sometimes combined with the invasion of alien species. Restoring these vital services is an essential part of improving the

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44 Chen, M. (2008) 'Addressing poverty, reducing inequality', *Poverty in Focus*, 16: 6-7. Brasilia: UNDP International Poverty Centre.

45 UNRISD [United Nations Research Institute for Social Development] (2010) *Combating Poverty And Inequality. Structural Change, Social Policy And Politics*. Geneva: UNRISD.

overall well being of cities and communities. Also, if done cleverly through arts-based programming, it can serve as a gateway to reconnect young people at risk to more positive and enriching ways of connecting with nature, community and their peers. There are literally hundreds of examples that one dream up if this logic is pursued.<sup>46</sup>

The other equally important dimension of rethinking urban economic life is the imperative to confront the challenge of raising growth, improving the distributive aspects of growth, and improving the environmental impacts of economic processes that generate growth; or stated in policy parlance: decarbonising growth which is closely tied to imperative of decoupling.<sup>47</sup> This is a particularly difficult challenge for economies and cities in the global South where economic growth and labour absorption cannot keep pace with social changes (e.g. more women joining the labour force as education attainment improves), population growth and in-migration.

This highly stylized and summative overview of a series of entry points to rethink and remake urban futures through substantive programmatic ideas and agendas illustrate the scope that exists to conduct (southern) urban studies in a very different key to the narcissistic obsession with the urban abyss.

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46 A variety of examples from across the global south are presented in: Smith, C. (ed) (2011) *Design for the other 90%: Cities*. New York: Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

47 Swilling and Annecke, op cit.; Suzuki, H., Dastur, A., Moffatt, S. and Yabuki, N. (2010) *Eco<sup>2</sup> Cities: Ecological Cities as Economic Cities*. Washington DC: World Bank; UNEP [United National Environment Programme] (2011) *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication*. Paris: UNEP.

It responds to the rich and continuously emergent potentialities of the city as it pulsates with a wide variety of agendas, interests, varying assemblages and possibility. This does not suggest we elide or obscure the emergency nature of systemic violence and exclusion that so patently mark the contemporary era. Instead it proposes that we use an affective and multi-dimensional engagement with the lived meanings and compensations of such dynamics and continuously adjust our balance to decipher the pragmatic prospect for effective intervention, whilst confronting the unassailable pain that travels with injustice and mendacity.

## IN CLOSING

In this admittedly wide-ranging and exploratory paper I have worked to elucidate that attempting to function as a knowledge institution focussed on emergent cities in global South is nothing short of a high wire act. In learning our craft of becoming adept at walking the tightrope, we need to understand the various ontological and epistemological dimensions of the overall knowledge project that has to simultaneously provincialize western-centred urban theories, enact a profound account of the deep socialities and attendant assemblages that make these cities emergent spaces, and squarely address the imperative to propose, no matter how provisional, substantive arguments for how life and times can be fundamentally different with as much specificity and historical groundedness as possible.

This agenda implies a number of specific political imperatives. One, we are effectively talking about the politicisation of everything, especially the future and regional city dynamics; not just the everyday

struggles around social reproduction. Two, the need to continuously pay attention to the imperative to reorder and re-articulate diverse political “moments” and openings in order to instigate a vibrant, agonist and adaptive politics. Three, the urgent need to rethink and recast social networks and political coalitions of diverse urban actors with a shared interests in the “public”, the commons and social justice, however this may articulate for a particular community of interest. Four, a serious engagement with institutional retrofitting, especially of the local state, but also the various institutional value-chains that play a part in reproducing the city. Practically this requires an account of how institutions in the city learn, or chronically fail to do so. Learning is tied to the imperatives of co-production, adaptive skills, and fundamentally, meaningful accountability. Finally, a new kind of attentiveness to the full spectrum of urban political life will lead us to appreciate the still largely untapped potential of a “design” sensibility in moving from analysis, to critique, to understanding, to proposition, to intervention, and possibly even, bring a little more aspiration, freedom, desire and justice into the urban world. This political horizon is the only one that can bring the requisite focus and balance to our experimental lives of learning the art that the high wire demands.