Urbanism beyond the City: Variations on a Theme

VYJAYANTHI RAO and ERICA ROBLES-ANDERSON

IN MEMORY OF MICHAEL SORKIN (1948–2020)

The concept of the city as a territorial and political form has long anchored social thought. By the twentieth century, the city figured prominently as a laboratory for testing modern techniques of governance. In the twenty-first century this discourse incarnates anew in visions of future mega- and smart cities. Then, as now, cities—as signs of the modern—are the elephants in a room full of adjacent concepts such as the state, the market, citizenship, collectivity, property, and care.

This issue picks up a thread from the 1996 special issue and 1998 book of prize-winning essays titled *Cities and Citizenship* (edited by James Holston and Arjun Appadurai). The contributors focused on the role of cities in the making of modern subjects by attending to associations between urbanism and modernity and thus with imperialism, colonialism, and extraction. Now, we reconfigure that line of inquiry to consider *Urbanism beyond the City* while bearing projections of the future in mind.

The United Nations projects that by 2050, two-thirds of the global population will live in cities or other urban centers. But this new density will be greatest in a small number of countries, none of which are in the Global North (United Nations 2018). Yet even as cities take unprecedented forms without discernible limits, spatial theorizing continues to invest in a particular concept of the city and to expand that concept's reach into other areas of study, planning, and investment (Amin 2013). Spatial professions capitalize on the city's capacity for generating complex intersections of social, economic, and political forces. Theorists attribute a capacity to distinguish among divergent possibilities mingling unpredictably to the urban apparatus (Martin 2017). Critical methods remain attached to the idea that cities—whether as infrastructures, instruments, or morphologies—anchor a very particular sense of social life. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994: 4) noted, philosophy coincides with the "contribution of cities: the formation of societies of friends or equals but also the promotion of relationships of rivalry between and within them." We position the concept of the city by treating it as a "friend" accompanying us through the journey presented in this special issue.

Such friendships, however, can hinder the exploration of divergent possibilities. Habits of thought can lead down familiar metaphysical paths, even when we seek to deepen and widen our knowledge about social collectives said to be predominantly shaped by urbanism, across the globe.

In her forum essay in this issue, Keller Easterling points out that critical methods remain rooted in an Enlightenment rationality resting on ideal forms. Thus, we draw on Katherine McKittrick's (2020) understanding of Black methodologies which suggest that "geography [and, by extension, other forms of disciplined inquiry] . . . signals enclosure—material, theoretical and analytic enclosure," and that we must read contemporary spatial forms as persistent sites of plantation logics in which "complex negotiations of time, space and terror" inflect the organization of "the prison, the city, the resort" (McKittrick 2013: 3).

Such critiques inject skepticism into emancipatory claims long associated with the city and by extension with several strands of urban studies. Thus, we undertake this journey by divesting from normative frameworks to embrace instead what La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2021: 36) calls "mad methodology," or an ensemble of "epistemological modes, political praxes, interpretive techniques, affective dispositions, existential orientations, and ways of life." This methodology offers no implicit teleology. Instead, like the free soloing rock climber who changes the rockface with each hammering of her piton, we are interested in the kind of work that transforms concepts as we go along, and in the endogenous capacity to generate new ground for inquiry as a result.

The multi-authored, multi-perspective journal format is well suited to this exercise. This issue features fifteen entries of varying lengths and styles. It has single authors, multiple authors, collectives, and ensembles. Nothing is prematurely classic. These essays defer any idea that there is an ideal type of city anchoring urbanity. Instead, each entry takes the urban on a journey elsewhere, to another place.

A new generation of urban analysts cast complicating light on several long-held assumptions. They observe densities in places that are not cities, avant-garde recombination on the front lines of urban survival, and minor public cultures just adjacent to major canonic forms. Marginalized players seek access to institutions with insurgent aims to unsettle their forms. Institutional functions no longer align with labels: the "university" is not the university, the "home" is not the home, the "market" is not the market. We see the painstaking work of mundane city-making in the daily lives of marginalized people. Even the seemingly durable stones and structures in the urban landscape can become fragile forms overnight. As we write this letter Russia bombs Karkhiv and Kyiv, major metropoles in a country where two-thirds of the people live in cities.

The issue proceeds in three parts: Inhabitations, Territories, and Speculations. But first, Keller Easterling prepares our sensibilities by way of an essayistic hors d'oeuvre entitled "Other than 'The City.'" Easterling frames this issue as "singing along with the lyrics that many are singing and writing just now. It is a song that anyone should be able to sing—one that rehearses a cultural fluency with space or describes more vivid and meaningful places of cultural investment."

Part I: Inhabitations opens with "Urban Popular Economies: Territories of Operation for Lives Deemed Worth Living" by the Urban Popular Economy Collective (Solomon Benjamin, Alioscia Castronovo, Luci Cavallero, Cristina Cielo, Véronica Gago, Prince Guma, Rupali Gupte, Victoria Habermehl, Lana Salman, Prasad Shetty, AbdouMaliq Simone, Constance Smith, and João Tonucci). This pathbreaking essay sets the pace for the issue and speaks directly to the mission of *Public Culture*.

The Collective centers majoritarian efforts to make "lives deemed worth living" within an *urban popular economy*. This "social economy of articulation, in which the multiple positions of any household are drawn together in varying degrees of mutual implication," produces livable territory, even if only provisionally. Participants maximize territorial possibilities by venturing beyond boundaries of identity, group membership, and neighborhood. The Collective observes instances of "working the diversities": street bazaars in Chennai and Shenzhen where people speak the same specialist languages, cafés where multiple diasporic communities converge, or piece-rate worker-organized supply chains coordinated through local church and women's associations. In the new informality "a more textured form of solidarity" arises and majorities "become something more than they have recognized themselves to be."

Emma Shaw Crane analyzes the *suburban periphery* of Miami in "The Poisoned Periphery: Research Methods for City's Edge" on Homestead, Florida. Her "methodological grammar" accounts for why a Superfund site, military base, nuclear power plant, and child migrant detention camp end up in the same zone. By connecting seemingly distant places—Florida, Colombia, Iraq—Crane supports common cause between scholars and activists who organized to shut the detention camp.

In "Battle for Housing and Mutual Witnessing," Camila Pierobon examines the "small, infinite, and quotidian battles" of staying in place in a Rio de Janeiro occupation during 2020. The local drug trafficking ring operated as a de facto housing authority, invading, evicting, and reallocating apartments. The calculus for these reallocations is ambiguous at best and dangerous at worst. Thus, everyone watches everyone else on a terrain of *mutual witnessing* where domesticity is a battleground maneuver.

In "Opaque Infrastructure: Black Markets as Architectures of Care," Huda Tayob locates the "Somali malls" of Cape Town within the tradition of Black Urbanism. Tayob redefines "black markets" from extralegal enterprises to architectures that "operate across grammars of transaction and care, refusing any insistence on categorization as discrete spatial typology." The opacity that can seem suspicious to outsiders turns out to be a vital infrastructure supporting diasporic relations between Somalia, Kenya, Dubai, Malawi, South Africa, and the United States.

Irene Peano reports on "Spatiotemporal Stratifications: Engaging Containment and Resistance in Italian Agrifood Districts." Peano's topological analysis explains how "the manifold layers of dispossession, displacement, and obliteration that superimpose in these zones are material and spectral traces of stratified imperial durabilities." As migrants arrive they displace prior migrants even as they are interpellated into a common underclass. Workers live in colonial and industrial ruins: old farmhouses, warehouses, military installations, and humanitarian aid camps. Thus, present-day struggles proceed in a landscape contoured by the spatial productions and histories of resistance of those who came before.

Prasad Khanolkar's "In Passing: Some Notes on Urban Life" takes inspiration from Walter Benjamin by asking, "How might we conceive Passagen-Work, down South?" Khanolkar's rag pickers are the waste workers in Mumbai and Gurugram slum settlements who manage the city's liquidity and excess. These residents operate in media res to make the city into something else. In the swelling, secreting, overflowing city, mediated complexity abounds. "To write urban life in passing, then, is not to explain the urban away or to get a hold on it, but to take it on a journey along new passages so that something else might emerge along the way."

Part II: Territories opens with an essay by Laura Pappalardo titled "Mapping Grounds for Infrastructural Reparations in Jaraguá Peak." Pappalardo is the cover artist for the issue. Her grayscale drawings depict a landscape in cross-section against a field of white. Construction machines dig into the side of a slope and barely visible trees seem to be fading away. But as Pappalardo's writing shows, cities are not built out of emptiness, and the ecologies they displace are often present and poised for return.

Her essay discusses São Paulo, where for hundreds of years development has come at the cost of thousands of overlapping geographies for peoples, animals, and plants who live in the Atlantic Forest. For the Guarani, the earth is a lively "terrestrial platform" that they maintain and are maintained by. In 2016, the municipality began making *infrastructural reparation* through the Guarani Greenbelt project to reforest parts of the city center and some neighborhoods. This active and ongoing restoration of multispecies relations and paths is a powerful model for reimagining urbanity in forest cities through indigeneity.

In "Digital Juneteenth: Territorializing the Freedom Colony Diaspora," Andrea Roberts, Valentina Aduen, Jennifer Blanks, Schuyler Carter, and Kendall Girault report on work with the Texas Freedom Colonies Project (TXFC). TXFC sustains the heritage of Black freedmen's towns and colonies. Hundreds of post-Emancipation settlements were founded as a "reterritorialization of freedom out of the state of social death (unfreedom) projected onto Black lives in America." Often unincorporated and unplatted, most are almost invisible in the landscape today. Yet they persist through diasporic practices and "grammars of placemaking." During 2020, TXFC supported the cultural reproduction of freedom colony stakeholders so that a living history of social justice could persist in new online, socially distanced forms. M. C. Overholt takes us to West Oakland, California in "Housing Is a Human Right: Moms for Housing's Black Feminist Politics of Shelter." In the midst of a pandemic and an eviction epidemic, a collective of homeless and marginally housed Black mothers occupied a residence to draw attention to the plight of living where "there are four times as many empty houses as there are unhoused individuals." So long as real-estate markets dictate prices, "shelter [is] an outlaw need." Through extralegal occupation and mutual aid, Moms for Housing rework the concept of "home" toward a "post-property future" where "housing is a human right."

Janette Kim's "Manifold Enclosures: Decommodifying Property at Esther's Orbit Room in West Oakland" describes the architecture of a "counter vision of property." In 2021 the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperatives (EB PREC) purchased the Orbit Room, a landmark on the West Coast blues scene. Established in 1959, it survived for decades by operating in lively interdependence with the city. In Kim's analysis, "Esther's Orbit Room allowed Mabry's ambitions to proliferate not by reaching out, but by subdividing and incorporating varied spaces within." EB PREC continues this tradition of "productive misalignments" between property lines and investment forms to build a home for Black arts and culture keepers.

In "Governance Interface: The Index in Modi's India," Mila Samdub analyzes the techniques and aesthetics of the "entrepreneurial state apparatus." Digital policymaking dashboards represent the nation as a territory of states that can be scored and compared. In India's new "calculative regime," datafication, public relations, and austerity come together to maximize governance while minimizing government support. Under neoliberalism, Indian federalism is a competition in which states can lose but never win.

In "Sumud: Repertoires of Resistance in Silwan," Mahdi Sabbagh brings us to Jerusalem's core as settler organizations backed by state agencies and private interests aim to remove any trace of Palestinians. Sabbagh asks, "What happens when people cannot build urban form or maintain what is left?" The answer is a form of

popular resistance known as *sumud*, or "steadfast perseverance" in staying put. Sabbagh expands the term to "architectural sumud" because under occupation, "the very act of building becomes an extension of life." A sit-in tent, first erected in 1997, operates as a landmark example of architectural sumud. The tent is a site for community gatherings as well as a target of state violence. It has been destroyed by police several times and is currently in its fifth incarnation.

Part III: Speculations consists of playful meditations on culture work and city making. "The Creative Politics of Legibility" is a conversation between Edgar Pieterse, Kim Gurney, and Neo Muyanga. The artist-researchers muse upon "finding new words, new vocabulary, and new forms and new ways of bringing those things together so that we can imagine a world that reads differently." Muyanga relates his experience collaborating with the Dutch National Opera and National Ballet on *How Anansi Freed the Stories of the World*. The idea was to weave together storytelling and musical traditions from Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe through a tale about Anansi the spider, the trickster renowned for crossing boundaries between the worlds of mortals and gods. "How," Pieterse asks, "do you design a process to allow for that inclusion, for people to shape it, but where you retain some kind of compositional coherence?"

Muyanga answers, "It is about coming with your hands full, not empty, to a platform of making." If institutions support artists spending time with one another, they can learn from each other's canons and traditions, and try things that could not be imagined in advance.

Pieterse and Gurney pick up the thread by discussing new forms of public space programming in Cape Town. They run a micro-gallery in a backyard garden shed and fund it by a stock portfolio, which is itself an artistic medium. Artistic explorations are very tricky things. As Gurney notes, "Like saying, 'Well, everything *can* be an artistic medium.' Even stocks and shares. How are you using it, did you consider it carefully, the ethics, are you being quite deliberate and careful in your use of something?" City making requires the clever boundary crossings of Anansi.

Rupali Gupte and Prasad Shetty close the issue with the essay "small forces." We enter the frame in Mumbai with the authors documenting dispossessions and land grabs, only to find that nothing is what it seems. The precarious tenant is a spy, the rapacious developer gets his kicks fighting lawsuits. As the frame expands, they encounter characters such as a bureaucrat building a Buddhist center, and places such as a municipal office that turns out to be a hotbed of love affairs and intrigues. The cartographic and statistical ethnographic methods of spatial professions simply did not prepare them for these idiosyncrasies. They conclude: "We had not understood their drives. It was clear that we hadn't understood the city."

Urbanism is a play of *small forces* moving through agencies, pleasures, surprising connections, and ambiguities. Gupte and Shetty shift their paradigm and begin experimenting with engaging these small forces through storytelling. They embrace a vision of the city filled with always-multiple, ever-morphing urban forms. *Public Culture* is interested in critical visions of majoritarian futures. Gupte and Shetty leave us with methods of urban planning for majoritarian society. "A city open for multiple futures" expands our capacity to better inhabit the planet that we share.

We thank all of the authors for their contributions to this issue, as well as Keller Easterling, AbdouMaliq Simone, and Tau Tavengwa for their help in conceiving this project over several years. Finally, our thanks to Anna Stielau for her generous and meticulous editorial assistance.

References

Amin, Ash. 2013. "The Urban Condition: A Challenge to Social Science." *Public Culture* 25, no. 2: 201–8.

Bruce, La Marr Jurelle. 2021. *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1994. *What Is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.

Martin, Reinhold. 2017. *The Urban Apparatus: Mediapolitics and the City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McKittrick, Katherine. 2013. "Plantation Futures." *Small Axe*, no. 42: 1–15.

McKittrick, Katherine. 2020. "Curiosities, Wonder, and Black Methodologies." Lecture given at the University of Virginia School of Architecture, Charlottesville, VA, September 14. www.arch.virginia.edu/events/katherine-mckittrick.

United Nations. 2018. "Around 2.5 Billion More People Will Be Living in Cities by 2050, Projects New UN Report." United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, May 16. www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-world-urbanization-prospects.html.