Vocabularies for Urban Futures: Critical Reflections

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Introduction

How might the urban be articulated? What analytical work do concepts do in making cities legible and knowable? The last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of conceptual vocabularies for understanding urban governance, economic formations and everyday life. These vocabularies have done much to assess the character of the city, its generative potential and socio-technological flows. Yet the city – as a meshwork of machines, metabolisms, matter, institutions, infrastructures, animals and people – constantly seems to overtake design and deliberation. It throws into question urban analysis, particularly modes confined to specialist sub-disciplines of urban studies, town and country planning, architecture and urban design. Do extant urban vocabularies grasp hybrid urban processes making and re-making economy and society, culture and nature? Or are we yet to consider, as Amin and Thrift poignantly ask, "how an ontology formed by urban specificities might require new intra- and inter-disciplinary composites of thought and method"?[1] Re-visiting long-standing vocabularies and re-evaluating concepts pertaining to the urban is, therefore, both timely and pressing.

In November 2017, the British Academy brought together approximately 25 scholars and practitioners from the UK and overseas to speculate on vocabularies for urban futures.[2] Hosted by the Academy's *Urban Futures* programme, the workshop was arranged so as to interrogate a set of key terms around which the urban has been understood, but also to develop new ways of imagining, anticipating and performing the city. This set of reflections seeks to outline diverse ways in which workshop participants engaged with concepts, traced their histories and put them to work.

The workshop was centred on vocabularies pertaining to four key themes (i.e. economies, habitat, governance and politics) that spoke directly to the British Academy's *Urban Futures* programme. Participants undertook critical appraisals of extant vocabularies

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in a number of directions, including thinking through emerging experiences of urban *habitat*, interrogating concepts pertaining to the *governance* of cities, vocabularies attentive to plural *economies*, and those articulating the *politics* of urban inhabitation.

What is a Vocabulary?

A vocabulary can be understood as a suite of concepts that speak to, or with, one another. Concepts help us to categorise or describe urban phenomena, but equally, and perhaps more so, they also do work to create productive connections and can allow us to think of new possibilities. At stake here is their ability to express states of urban affairs that are simultaneously contingent and dynamic. How might concepts be thought anew in relation to urban events, experiences or problems? How can they be put to work with the urban world and its heterogeneous entanglements, not apart from the circumstances of their production, hypothetical or conceived *a priori*? What outcomes and urban futures might concepts anticipate, even if these are outcomes we might not observe at all? We recognise that conceptual vocabularies pertaining to cities require distributed and combinatorial knowledge practices, thus calling into question disciplinary and professional legacies. Equally, concepts concerned with the relational ontology of the city, where many kinds of gravitational potentials intertwine, demand multi-modal sensibilities crossing porous human-nonhuman bodies and lay-expert divides. Furthermore, concepts can have political charge, summoning different coalitions and matters of concern than those traditionally associated with the city.

From Vocabulary to Vocabularies

We are far from the first to propose developing new vocabularies for thinking cities. We might, for instance, think of Amin and Thrift's book *Cities,* Harrison et al.'s collection, *Patterned Ground*, or Latham et al.'s *Key Concepts*.[3] There can never be one vocabulary, one set of terms, to make sense of all cities nor all urban experiences. And this is why the terms we have selected are best considered as placeholders, ones there to act as prompts to thought. They are meant as *provocations rather than prescriptions*. It is for this reason that we asked workshop participants to think about (1) the analytical work that 'their' concept does in terms of making cities legible and knowable; (2) the trajectory of such a term thus far; and (3) where it might go (if anywhere) in the future. In other words, then, we wondered "what form of distillation is possible without violating the character of cities as 'pluriverses'."[4] We were mindful, however, that there is always the danger that a lexicon for thinking about urban futures could be used in a universalising fashion. We would like to underline that this was far from our intention. Indeed, this provisional list of concepts was not intended to be exhaustive and we encouraged participants not just to contest them, but to add to them.

Economies

The importance of thinking about the urban in relation to the economy needs little reiteration. Whilst traditions and methods of doing so have changed over time, certain concepts have had durability in terms of articulating what urban economies are, and ways in which they may be called into question. Questions around urban economies continue to generate traction, evidenced in recent moves to talk about 'smart', 'resilient' and even 'green' cities. To this end, the workshop discussion focused on vocabularies navigating *economies* in a plural sense: concepts that were attentive to general principles, but treating strictures as immanent and not totalising.

The concept of the **commons**, as Oli Mould argued, has been of particular import for thinking about political economies of resource use. Struggles over the commons and common life are now coming to the forefront of urban political activism and scholarly enquiry. 'Everything flows from the commons': the state of resources before they are cut up, territorialised, re-distributed. Yet, the term is also aspirational: seeking potential futures that hark more equal access and sharing of urban resources. The term has a number of analogues – commonwealth, commune, commoning – each with their corresponding spiritual, material and political-economic dimensions. Pertinent examples of the commons at work include the Calais 'jungle' that drew various constituencies together before it was violently destroyed. There is a difference, however, between commons and publics: the former (in the form of 'commoning') is greater than a sum of its parts whilst the latter is a sum of its parts. Commons are also at work in several other spheres, including anti-gentrification campaigns in London. Yet, deploying the concept in practice rubs up against challenges in contemporary urban economies. A central question is that of scale: how might the notion of commons be expanded to generate fair and equitable public housing?

If the notion of the commons points to a political imagination of what plural economies might be like, the concept of **metabolism** serves as an organising metaphor for human's relationship with the material world in cities. As David Wachsmuth suggested, metabolism characterises system properties: material flows and concomitant socio-spatial practices resulting in the emergence of phenomena termed 'urbanisation'. The concept has had a variegated history and is a pivot for interdisciplinary scholarship. In urban studies, metabolism has been privy to a promiscuous usage: from articulating the relation between the city and the countryside, as analogue of society in relation to nature (Chicago School), to a dynamics of settlement and liveability brought about through systems of inputs-outputs or chains of extraction, production and consumption (Industrial Ecology/Vienna School). Metabolism refers to multiple scales and indexes self-organising principles. Here, cities may be seen as systems within

systems of cities. There is an ontological prioritisation of growth and change when the term is invoked, but it does analytical work in terms of drawing the ecological and economic together in relation to articulating what urbanisation entails.

A different iteration of the economy-materiality dynamic is at work in the concept of **networks**. As Colin McFarlane reminded us, even though the term might seem to be going out of fashion – one might ask 'what happened to networks?' – the concept returns to haunt analyses of the city. In practice, the ideal of integrated networked city is remarkably wide-spread: it is difficult to think the urban without it. Yet, networks are not just a concept – they are *onto-political*. Their durability is evidenced by the proliferation of economic geographical work on global production networks (GPN), which maps onto the notion of metabolism and its evocations of socio-spatial and material flows. Other iterations of the term 'network' include the work of feminist economists such as JK Gibson-Graham, who view networks as post-capitalist alternatives right under our noses.[5] Working examples of such alternatives include the networked ecology/economy of access to informal housing in Kampala, Uganda, where people, through social networks, are able to deal with contingent, affective economies. The case for networks, in practice, hardly needs to be made. But a challenge emerges when the question is put differently: how might networks be rendered more inclusive, such that the disenfranchised are enrolled on an equal footing? An alternative to networks is that of 'ecological thought': thinking through relations and relating in an emergent, less hierarchical fashion. It points to directions of moving beyond the network as a political imaginary – what next?

The terms 'commons', 'metabolism' and 'networks' speak to one another, and consequently, have much to offer for thinking about urban economies. Everyday lives create commons. For instance, as Fulong Wu highlighted, in Chinese cities the standard view is that urban markets drive urbanisation. Yet in practice, it is the arrival of migrants that creates demand. Similarly, metabolism is deployed by proponents of circular economies to indicate ways in which economic opportunities might be generated in cities. Yet, metabolism points to the urban beyond the limit of the city, thereby opening up questions about flow. Networks have been around since the heyday of the quantitative revolution, but took a different turn when questions on power and flow were embraced by economic geography, therefore gravitating towards an ecology of networks. Concepts of metabolism and network do particular work in bringing ecologies and economies together. Here, workshop participants pointed towards the importance of attending to the scale and politics of networks. For instance, when the demonetisation event happened in India in 2017, it resulted in the snapping of informal networks, with important material and political economic effects. Similarly, the adoption of ecological terms when thinking about networks, manifest in new *mantras* about urban 'resilience', elides some of these uneven political economies at work.[6]

If concepts such as the 'commons', 'metabolism' and 'networks' enable, often helpful, articulations of plural urban economies, there tend to be particular disciplinary heritages to their deployment. There remains a danger that these terms are only used in the critical social sciences and for informal economies, not the 'real' economy. How might we use these concepts to decentre the powerhouse that is economics, rather than remain in our own disciplinary silos? Some point to their relevance given the extent to which conceptual imaginations have been colonised, as in the case of the 'naturalisation' of capitalism in mainstream economic thinking or in the 'blending of discourses' evidenced in propositions such as the 'green economy'.[7] The latter continues to have purchase and generate considerable funds for (often uneven) urban development.

Another way of thinking beyond disciplinary silos pertains to giving an equal voice to *practice* as much as vocabularies. How might we bring alternate concepts to the fore through practice, such that shifts in power/knowledge formations can be registered? For instance, one might ask that if metabolism and networks are ways of managing the city, what do they operationalise? Commons is a pressing example. Hardin's formulation of the commons was about formal economies, whereas the term 'communing' is more informal, implying commons in *practice*.[8] Institutions too can be thought of as commons: ripe for take-over. In other words, the relations between concepts and practice, the formal and the informal, make for important points of debate and deliberation when thinking through grammars for attending to plural urban economies.

Governance

Governance remains a key way of thinking about how cities come to be organised, and often goes hand-in-hand with economy as a theme that registers on a more macro-political register. As part of the workshop, there was a keen effort to interrogate concepts pertaining to the governance of plural cities. Inverted, the question might be 'how do plural modes of governance of cities co-exist, or even unsettle one another?'. More specifically, participants grappled with what concepts might allow us to establish some kind of analytical purchase on governance in ways that foreground the mechanisms which compose it, mechanisms which are simultaneously structural and relational, recursive and emergent.

If we consider the pivotal work of Foucault to think how governance 'works', we can see the persistence of **calculation**.[9] Indeed, as Ravi Sundaram pointed out, calculation has dramatically re-inserted itself into public life, in large part through the demand for metrics and measure at all levels. We might even think of the contemporary situation as an escalation from what Ian Hacking described as an 'avalanche of numbers' in the 19th

century to the rise of calculative technologies, now often imbricated in all forms of sensory infrastructure.[10] The orchestration of such enormous flows, both humans and non-humans, has increasingly put a strain on urban governance. The rise of the mobile phone as a calculative device is indicative. As a calculative engine, it re-orders everyday governance through images; as a circulation engine it attaches to new platforms of political spaces. This transformation of expressivity is what Mark Hansen has termed 'feeding forward'.[11] It is quite simply a re-engineering of consciousness, where the emergence of an 'atmospheric media' is always more than measure or calculation – it is anticipatory. Put otherwise, this is a radical re-statement of measure. The political project facing us now is not simply whether or not to enter such calculative infrastructures, but rather to develop techniques for exit.

The ubiquity of calculative technologies can be seen all over the city. For example, there is an on-going project called Citizen Sense where air pollution is measured.[12] Put simply, this project examines the ways in which urban habitats become hazardous through modalities of sensing. In this complex mix of knowledges and technologies, Jennifer Gabrys argued that **expertise** is always and inexorably remade. From the viewpoint of experts, air pollution is seen as an intractable problem – especially as sensory practices multiply questions about accuracy and data quality. However, the rise of digital sensors also promises to expand the number of kinds of experts that can, in turn, differently constitute the problem of air pollution. Processes of 'evidencing' harm might, then, move beyond a primarily indexical or evidential tracing of pollutants, whether through high-tech or low-cost instrumentation, to engage also with addressing how facts or evidence 'take hold'. In a pluralistic ontology, this re-thinking of expertise – this multiplication of expertise – allows for many forms of things (human and otherwise) that inundate the urban habitat to be made palpable. The re-distribution of expertise is also, then, potentially a re-imagining of citizenship.

In the same way that thinking expertise foregrounds the practice – as much as the notion – of governance, so too do questions of **well-being**. Sushrut Jadhav showed how the concept of well-being, as operationalised by state-led psychiatry, faces major challenges. This is in part due to the commodification of well-being. One example of this is sleep. In cities around the world, there is an industry to prescribing medications for sleep. Much of this follows a dangerously unreflexive pathway, from 'terminology' (e.g. sleep disorder), to 'prescription', with the aim of producing an auditable 'result'. In this example, all too often such prescriptive approaches limit the possibilities of what well-being might look or feel like. Accordingly, it can become productive to think of other ways of going on in the city. Think, for instance, of the homeless in London. We find here other ways through which people sleep, with and against the grain of urban governance. Examples includes relations between the 'homeless' and their pet dogs, where breathing is synchronised, warmth generated and safe spaces secured. This example runs counter to the panlexicon of psychiatry, aimed at generating quick fixes through prescriptions. Rather than viewing homelessness and lack of sleep as

a pathology, one might think of such practices as active forms of resistance to the state. A critical re-appraisal of the idea of well-being thus needs to move away from the sanitised vocabularies of psychiatry. And it is important to remember that this approach of terminology or diagnosing social ills extends beyond the medicalised discourse of well-being.

It is clear that there are numerous connections between 'calculation', 'expertise' and 'well-being'. The workshop discussion, led by Tatiana Thieme, picked up, in particular, on the abundance of records in the contemporary urban life, especially in this age of the 'quantified self'. And yet, there is not always much done with these records, and there are all kinds of limitations in making sense of them. Equally, calculation generates its own rhythms; certain temporalities are shortened, while others are protracted. Calculation often invokes questions of risk and reward, but the question of what bodies are brought into the realm of urban calculation is a key theme that needs to be addressed. For instance, biometrics spatialise. They order where people ought to be and ought to sleep. The workshop discussion pointed to cases in Paris where people (frequently migrants and refugees) sleep rough in order to avoid biometrics. One might even talk about the right to the city as the 'right to sleep'. Questions of the right to the city also relate to questions about digitisation and governance of cities. How might this turn to digitisation be made vernacular? We need to un-blackbox algorithms and code, get beyond technocratic closure and obfuscation, and pay further attention to the material sites where calculation is taking place. If not, calculation will be the purview of experts, of the elite. We must be mindful here of the links between calculation and rationalisation, mathematicisation, modernisation and organisation. We found ourselves wondering if we might be able to create new terms which are untethered from these other ideas. Or is this temptation to create new vocabularies misguided? Might it not be more effective to re-deploy extant terms in unexpected and disruptive ways?

Habitat

Habitat, its connections with the built environment and different aspects of the 'living city' as a structural and ecological assemblage, is a vital dimension of the urban. The idea of 'habitat' can be intuitively taken to entail infrastructures or the material environment more broadly, hence posing the question how concepts such as fantasy, affect, ecology and the vernacular might be markers of habitat? A key point here, and one critical to understanding habitat in its polyvalent registers, is that urban habitats can also encompass more complex or diffuse types of attachments, atmospheres and subjectivities.[13] These concepts thus open up rich ways through which habitat might be interrogated and understood.

Affect has emerged as a key concept in geography and the wider social sciences but, as Christian Borch reminded us, little seems to have been done in terms of thinking affect in relation to the urban. Affects relate to passions. They can be engineered, produced or emerge as the by-product of relations. Urban affects might spiral out of control. For instance, analyses of the 2011 London 'riots' focused on rational responses, but little is mentioned about passions or 'getting caught up' in the violence – an intervention that enables very different understandings of what motivates action, belonging, or for that matter disenfranchisement. Furthermore, what affects might be particular to cities? This question provokes an empirical task of mapping urban affects: the ways in which urban inhabitation might be understood in its material-ecological specificities. At stake here, and this is what turning to affect enables, are tensions between individuals and their actions (as witnessed in the ordered, governed, rational city) versus an affective push – action emerging through entanglements between heterogeneous bodies. Affects also point to a politics of urban habitat, witnessed in the contradictions or tensions between the spectacular, exuberant city and dispossessed individuals. What comes to the fore are other ways of understanding the politics of urban development and capital.

The latter point is made evident through further explorations of **fantasy**: the generation of particular worlds, not always 'real', through urban experience. Thinking about fantasy, Steve Pile argued, often gravitates toward spectacular productions of such worlds – cities such as Las Vegas frequently come to mind. But what about thinking fantasy from more quotidian, ordinary sites, such as Stoke-on-Trent? One aspect of fantasy that often evades scholarship, but can come to the fore through such an analysis, are relations between the visible and the invisible urban. When attention is turned toward spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent, for example, one begins to witness a very different ontology at work – one that is neither Christian nor 'Western' – shorthands frequently deployed to encapsulate cities in the developed world. Attending to spiritualism and its 'fantasies' points to a heterogeneity of the urban: a re-distribution of the sensible that is incommensurable across cities. In other words, fantasies do not necessarily add up – inter-faith healing in Stoke-on-Trent points to an 'alongsideness' rather than a (thrown) togetherness of the experience of urban habitat. Such a take on fantasy begs questions of urban vocabularies: what does this do to *our* ontologies?

Like affect and fantasy, the concept of the **vernacular** – introduced by Sarah Whatmore – does important 'gravitational work' for articulations of habitat. Firstly, it foregrounds the urban as an ecological process. Whilst there might seem to be little analytical traction on the term 'vernacular', the vernacular refers to emergent properties in relation to the living city and has particular import for thinking about urban nature. Secondly, the concept gives grip to the kinds of politics that emerge when different knowledge competencies – be they 'expert' or 'everyday' – are given due attention when dealing with the urban. At stake here are ecological knowledges

of people – partial movements and mobilities that cannot be reduced to notions of 'urban space' or an urban habitat 'out there' and laid out in advance of who or what comes into composition. The vernacular can also be thought of as an index to distinct ecologies of the urban. The first might entail cultivated ecologies: allotments, sites of cultivation, where other bodily practices and ways to be affected become evident. The second ecology pertains to the remnant: residual spaces such as wildlife corridors and waterways that are inexorable parts of the urban fabric and ecological infrastructure. The third relates to the feral: ecological fabrications with and against the grain of expert design. Here, the interface between the vernacular and ecological models is noteworthy. Whilst models have increasingly become part of articulating the potentials and futures of urban environments, it is important to bear in mind that models do not simply simulate, *but perform*. Multiple knowledge-practices foregrounded by the vernacular thus become important when thinking about who or what composes urban habitat, and what relations mark liveability.

The 'vernacular', 'fantasy' and 'affect' open up a plural understanding of urban habitat. Whilst habitat itself, until recently, has had a limited history of usage in the Anglophone geography tradition, Phil Hubbard, in the workshop discussion, pointed out that its deployment in Francophone urban studies is much more frequent. There are two key points that need further elaboration when thinking through urban habitat and how it might be conceptualised. The first pertains to the conflation of habitat and habitability: how might we think of the inverse, i.e. forces and affordances that make cities less habitable and not solely in registers of that which stems from conviviality? For instance, learning *not* to be affected is equally important as cities are contagious and affects infect and percolate. The second points to tensions between that which is given (habitat) and emergent/creative modes of being-in-the-world (inhabitation). The vernacular, fantasy and affect, with their emphasis on alongsideness and relation, say as much against one another, as they do in agreement. The triad indexes plural ways of articulating and knowing urban habitat, in part through what they summon and in part through their conceptual labour. But what about the connection between habit and habitat which, in some ways, speak to the concept of habitus? Or for that matter, how might we think of the relation between habit and the vernacular? What categories might we use to think of religion, pivotal to many forms of urban experience and order?

Nonetheless, what concepts of fantasy, affect and the vernacular do is to enable thinking through how desire is folded back into the city. At stake here is not just a uniform or singular notion of desire but desire that stems from variegated, vernacular and queer ecologies of the city. This consequently destabilises what the 'urban' and the 'human' is. Furthermore, thinking through fantasy in relation to spiritualism points towards proliferating ontologies which cross-cut natures and cultures, a movement difficult to pinpoint in singular terms. Thus, the heterogeneity of the urban, encompassed by concepts such as affect, fantasy and the vernacular,

is manifested in ways other than what simply habitat and habitation might imply. For instance, the vernacular as a concept can point to other forms of 'know-how' that habit, with its emphasis on repetition, might elide. Concepts pertaining to urban habitat are far from settled, and it is perhaps not the work of concepts to generate peaceful settlements.

Politics

The fourth organising theme for the workshop focused on vocabularies articulating the politics of living together in cities. There is no shortage of interest in urban politics, perhaps because the notion of the cosmopolitan city *promises* a politics of difference and democracy. The politics of urban life, often understood in terms of the right to the city, still needs to address how urban spaces, institutions and practices might lead to cities for the many, and not the few.

Difference, as Somaiyeh Falahat suggested, has become a key term in such debates about the good city. It also features, in a modified way, as diversity. In this second form, difference is associated with questions of equality and justice. But difference, in and of itself, is indexed to comparison, in the way that it pits the same against otherness. It may well be that we need multiple concepts from different cities in order to articulate the pulses, performances and politics of different cities. Enriching our vocabularies with concepts from different settings provides tools not only for contextualising cities marginalised in the existing body of urban theory, but also for multiplying our readings of cities in general. A more inclusive mode of knowledge-production about the urban may catalyse new understandings of the manifold relations between cities and difference.

Difference is often made palpable through **encounters**. The encounter, as Helen Wilson pointed out, has been understood in the social sciences with recourse to a familiar body of thinkers, even though some of these did not deploy the term itself. Jane Jacobs, for instance, preferred to talk of 'contact'.[14] Similarly, there is Goffman's notion of face-to-face contact in the performative dimensions of everyday life.[15] Nevertheless, it has come to feature much more in recent years and the politics of the encounter have come to the fore. Encounters might be understood as an event of relation; encounters do not hold things together but are generative of difference. Whilst they may be manipulated, they are not manageable as encounters are not entirely shared.

Encounters take place not just between bodies but also ideas. Here we might think of how claims about our 'urban age' feed into the living present. The future, forever at a distance, operates as a particular vocabulary of time but also as the hope of

utopian urbanism. Some of these aspirational, networked futures, as Ayona Datta put it, are most evident in **postcolonial** contexts. Indeed, the postcolonial city has become a site for all kinds of future imaginations, not simply the imposition of another future from elsewhere but subaltern futures which point towards a vernacularisation of time. The question in such a context is not simply 'Where am I?' but 'When am I?'.

These hopes for utopian urbanisms are closely related to the question of **rights**. To be sure, rights have a utopian quality. However, as Teresa Caldeira showed, if we think of the right to transport, or the right to the environment, they seldom work in practice. Instead, rights open up a space for political struggle and can be multiplied in social movements. Perhaps crucially, rights are often present in discussions because of their lack. As such, it becomes imperative to enunciate rights in order to create political dialogue and debate; it is, after Hannah Arendt, about the 'right to have rights'.[16] And we might go further than this; it is not just about rights but about polity. Rights, then, can be an impetus for radical experiments in democracy.

Across these various concepts, it is vital to consider how political ontologies work both to obscure and to highlight the city. What kind of city might we hope for? The discussion, led by Stephen Graham, reminded us of the importance of science fiction not just for anticipating future cities but critically commenting on contemporary ones. For example, *Blade Runner* was a film about a city 30 years in the future, which is 30 years in the past. What kind of politics are embroiled in such processes of futuring? What kinds of future-images gain traction, and why? What kind of possibility is there for co-existing differences?

The workshop discussion also considered how rights are never simply gained; they must be struggled over. What, then, are the struggles we face today in our fights for the right to the city? And what of the encounters that may pass under the radar? Here we considered encounters with various non-humans, and how 're-wilding' the city may generate 'incompossible worlds'. What might these feral spaces of encounter look like?

Future Urbans; Future Vocabularies

In terms of a wider discussion, the workshop moved toward thinking about what it might mean to develop vocabularies for urban futures, and more significantly, *why* this might be a generative exercise. Urban specificities and the ontologies they herald demand critical engagement for a number of reasons. Firstly, as Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin pointed out, people are beginning to talk differently about what composes the urban. For instance, one might evoke the notion of 'urbanisation without urbanity', which makes room for practices such as urban agriculture traditionally not equated

with the urban, but of paramount importance when attending to emergent dimensions of contemporary urban life. Secondly, scale is beginning to bite. The population and spatial extent of the urban is unprecedented. For example, Guangzho in China has registered a 925% increase in its population, with an increase in its footprint by 1800%; this is larger than Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland combined. Cities are thus qualitatively different and an attention to these processes requires more, not less, intellectual investment. Thirdly, there are questions about economic inequality and despair. Fourthly, governance seems to have rubbed up against major challenges. Can we have democracy in cities of this magnitude?

What, then, should we do about the city? Questions about the food system and urban metabolism come to the fore. How many animals are killed in each city and for what kinds of consumptive ends? What ledgers do we deploy to account for their footprint? Equally important is understanding the way people in cities think. The anthropological record is chock-a-bloc with urban ethnographies. What are the implications for re-thinking and re-defining citizenship? This leads us to invest more thinking into how space can be presented and represented. Cities have histories of belonging and are entities people can identify with in ways that they do not with nation-states. Cities can thus be helpful political entities at a time when nation-states are becoming impossible. At stake here, then, is the work of aggregation. How might different institutions – and institutions as commons – be brought together to address questions of economies, governance, habitat and politics? A buckshot approach could make for better cities. The role of universities and academia should not be downplayed. We ought to be aware, following Isabelle Stengers, that each achievement matters, however big or small.[17]

Why, then, appraise vocabularies? And why should we be interested in how a grammar of the urban is political? Concepts, when deployed in conjunction, either as a vocabulary or grammar, cannot be placed outside of urban matters of concern. However, the politics evoked by such an endeavour is less about politics in a majoritarian sense of habitation, but more in tune with what Abdoumaliq Simone terms a 'politics of the uninhabitable', signalling rhythms of endurance and hybrid connections made and re-made in the spaces of everyday life.[18] The labour of concepts then is to interrogate, re-articulate and re-shuffle. The endeavour of making sense of the complex city, its meshwork of institutions, infrastructures, inter-relationships and intimacies, is to develop an unsettling grammar of the urban.

The starting point for such a task – developing an 'unsettling grammar' – is not solely through re-appraisals of past iterations, but also about drawing attention to the vectors of making and dwelling the city, retrieving an intersectional politics that rest close to the urban base. With the rise of new regimes of algorithmic governance, which fold together the sensory and the calculative, the open politics that are at stake could do well by attending to notions of the vernacular. How might calculation be interrogated

as a vernacular set of practices? Here conceptual work becomes generative, not to mention political. Furthermore, staying close to vectors of dwelling enables salvaging metaphors from those who live the urban. It can exceed limits of bounded ideas through bricolage, enabling grammars themselves to be an ecology of the make-shift, attentive to what we see, which is often under our noses. Such an ecological grammar is then about a distributed urban, formed in composition with the non-human. We might reflect here on what kinds of cartographies and methods might enable the distributed urban to come to be sensed and made sense of? An unsettling grammar is about catching up with the city: horizontally, ontologically and expressively.

Vocabularies, Grammars, Practices

Whilst introducing this discussion on urban vocabularies, we were aware of the fact that the urban gets glued to terms in the nomenclature presented. For this reason, the workshop started with concepts as *provocations rather than prescriptions*. The discussion that ensued over the course of the workshop was generative and spoke closely not just to the British Academy's *Urban Futures* programme but as a wider appraisal of how the critical social sciences and academic institutions might deal with the problematic of urban futures.

Concepts do considerable analytical work in making cities legible and knowable. An important question, then, is how can concepts be brought to have bearings upon practice? Some of the interventions at the workshop, for instance those on well-being and expertise, explicitly took up this challenge. We learn from practice that alternate vocabularies create generative exposures, mindful of other modes of inhabiting the urban and open to plural experiences erased by majoritarian design. A second theme, pertaining to the trajectory or 'life-courses' of concepts, was how they are made and re-made in urban practice. Dissections of certain terms showed how they had become 'media-enabled', proliferating in uncritical and unhelpful ways, at best becoming empty signifiers and at worst subject to unwanted capture. As with past iterations, what is evident is that thinking through concepts is not merely an academic exercise, but is a practical activity of dealing with the complex city and urban chasms. A third theme, which rests close to future priorities, is the scepticism towards a universal grammar without losing the potential for collective work and deliberation. Interrogating the urban through a suite of concepts, vocabulary or grammar, also points to worlds not shared and the politics that emerge as a result. Cities are pluriverses. What is needed is a language that enables coping with indeterminacy. No mean feat, but critical engagement is a step in that direction.

Notes

1 Amin, A. and Thrift, N. (2017) *Seeing Like a City*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p.10.

2 For the workshop programme and a list of participants, see Appendix.

3 Amin, A. and Thrift, N. (2002) *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Harrison, S., Pile, S. and Thrift, N. (eds) (2004) *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd; Latham, A., McCormack, D., McNamara, K. and McNeill, D. (2009) *Key Concepts in Urban Geography*. London: Sage.

4 Amin, A. and Thrift, N. (2016) *Seeing Like a City*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p.2.

5 Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006) *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

6 See also Thieme, T. (2017) A Reflection on Resilient Urban Economies. *British Academy*. Available at: https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Resilient%20Urban%20Economies%20Note.pdf

7 See, for instance, Mirowski, P. (2013) *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London: Verso Books.

8 Hardin, G. (1968) The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*, 162: 1243–1248.

9 See, for instance, Foucault, M. (2007) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1977–1978 (trans. Burchell, G.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Foucault, M. (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1978–1979 (trans. Burchell, G.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

10 Hacking, I. (1990) *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

11 Hansen, M.B.N. (2015) *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First Century Media*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

12 See, citizensense.net/projects/pollution-sensing/.

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15 Goffman, E. (1983) The Interaction Order, *American Sociological Review*. 48: 1–17.

16 Arendt, H. (2017[1951]) *Origins of Totalitarianism*. London: Penguin.

17 Stengers, I. (2015) *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Open Humanities Press. p.153.

18 Simone, A. (2017) *The Uninhabitable: Afterlives of the Urban South*. Smuts Memorial Lecture Series, Cambridge; Simone, A. (2016) The Uninhabitable? In between Collapsed Yet Still Rigid Distinctions. *Cultural Politics* 12(2): 135–154.

Appendix

Vocabularies for Urban Futures Workshop

23 November 2017

Venue: British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AH

Programme

09.30 – 09.45	**Opening Remarks** Professor Ash Amin FBA, Foreign Secretary and Vice-President, British Academy; Dr Maan Barua, Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Cambridge; Dr Thomas Jellis, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Oxford
09.45 – 11.15	**Urban Economies** Interlocutor: Professor Fulong Wu, Barlett Professor of Planning, University College London *Commons*: Dr Oli Mould, Lecturer in Human Geography, Royal Holloway University of London; *Metabolism*: Dr David Wachsmuth, Assistant Professor, School of Urban Planning, McGill University; *Networks*: Professor Colin McFarlane, Professor of Geography, Durham University *Open Floor Discussion*
11.15 – 11.30	Tea/coffee break
11.30 – 13.00	**Urban Governance** Interlocutor: Dr Tatiana Thieme, Lecturer in Human Geography, University College London *Calculation*: Professor Ravi Sundaram, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies; *Expertise*: Professor Jennifer Gabrys, Professor of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London; *Well-being*: Dr Sushrut Jadhav, Senior Lecturer in Cross-Cultural Psychiatry, University College London *Open Floor Discussion*
13.00 – 14.00	Lunch

14.00 – 15.30	**Urban Habitat** Interlocutor: Professor Philip Hubbard, Professor of Urban Studies, King's College London *Affect*: Professor Christian Borch, Professor of Sociology and Urbanism, Copenhagen Business School; *Fantasy*: Professor Steve Pile, Professor of Human Geography, The Open University; *Vernacular*: Professor Sarah Whatmore FBA, Professor of Environment and Public Policy, University of Oxford *Open Floor Discussion*
15.30 – 15.45	Tea/coffee break
15.45 – 17.15	**Urban Politics** Interlocutor: Professor Stephen Graham, Professor of Cities and Society, University of Newcastle *Difference:* Dr Somaiyeh Falahat, Feodo-Lynen Research Fellow, University of Cambridge; *Encounter*: Dr Helen Wilson, Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Durham; *Postcolonial*: Dr Ayona Datta, Reader in Urban Futures, King's College London; *Rights*: Professor Teresa Caldeira, Professor of City and Regional Planning, University of California, Berkeley *Open Floor Discussion*
17.15 – 17.30	Tea/coffee break
17.30 – 18.00	**Reflections** Professor Ash Amin FBA, Foreign Secretary and Vice-President, British Academy; Professor Nigel Thrift FBA, Fellow, British Academy
18.00 – 18.15	**Closing Remarks** Dr Maan Barua, Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Cambridge; Dr Thomas Jellis, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Oxford

Participant list

Professor Ash Amin CBE FBA
Foreign Secretary & Vice-President, British Academy

Dr Maan Barua
Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Cambridge

Professor Christian Borch
Professor of Sociology and Urbanism, Copenhagen Business School

Professor Teresa Caldeira
Professor of City and Regional Planning, University of California, Berkeley

Judit Carrera
Head of Debates and Conferences Programme, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona

Dr Ayona Datta
Reader in Urban Futures, King's College London

Dr Somaiyeh Falahat
Feodo-Lynen Research Fellow, University of Cambridge

Professor Jennifer Gabrys
Professor of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London

Professor Stephen Graham
Professor of Cities and Society, University of Newcastle

Professor Philip Hubbard
Professor of Urban Studies, King's College London

Dr Sushrut Jadhav
Senior Lecturer in Cross-Cultural Psychiatry, University College London

Dr Thomas Jellis
British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford

Professor Colin McFarlane
Professor of Geography, Durham University

Dr Oli Mould
Lecturer in Human Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London

Professor Steve Pile
Professor of Human Geography, The Open University

Professor Ravi Sundaram
Professor in Media Studies and Urbanism, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

Dr Tatiana Thieme
Lecturer in Human Geography, University College London

Professor Sir Nigel Thrift DL FBA
Fellow, British Academy

Dr Antonis Vradis
Vice Chancellor's Fellow and Lecturer, Department of Geography, Loughborough University

Dr David Wachsmuth
Assistant Professor, School of Urban Planning, McGill University

Professor Sarah Whatmore FBA
Professor of Environment and Public Policy, University of Oxford

Dr Helen Wilson
Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Durham

Professor Fulong Wu
Barlett Professor of Planning, University College London