# Habitat and Living in Plural Cities: a Critical Reflection

Matthew Gandy*

## *Introduction*

What connections, structures and relationships enable liveable cities? What are the multifarious connections between urban habitats, the built environment and different aspects of the "living city" as a structural and ecological assemblage? The idea of "habitats" can encompass infrastructures, services and expanded conceptions of the urban environment, extending to both visible and hidden domains of urban metabolism. We can consider different scales of analysis from the multi-sensory domain of the individual human subject to more complex or diffuse types of attachments, atmospheres and subjectivities.

In March 2017 the British Academy brought together a range of scholars and practitioners to explore a series of questions relating to life, living and urban space, reflecting on the material environments of cities and also different forms of social, cultural and ecological complexity.[1] In addition to the workshop, we ran a public panel discussion which enabled many interesting contributions from the audience.[2] This briefing seeks to give voice to a range of ideas emerging from the debates and discussion.

The workshop and associated public event examined the interactions between habitats, modes of inhabitation, and social well-being, including the potential role of nature, design, materials and infrastructures in improving social cohesion and urban sustainability. The examples ranged from more familiar types of networks to various forms of "green infrastructure" including biodiversity, "ecosystem services" and different ways of conceptualising urban metabolism.

## *Imagining Infrastructures*

Infrastructure is one of the most complex, fascinating and multi-faceted dimensions of urban space. When we reflect on urban infrastructure, there is a persistent sense that infrastructure is something tangible or material: we can observe an array of pipes, wires or ecosystems that underpin everyday life. The socio-ecological assemblages that provide energy, food, water and other basic elements of modernity can even be

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considered a form of "ecological infrastructure" emphasising how modernity rests on the refashioning of both nature and urban space to produce a new kind of metropolitan synthesis. The idea of infrastructure also extends to the human body, either in terms of the "body as infrastructure", articulated especially in relation to the infrastructure-poor cities of the global south by Abdou Maliq Simone, or the technologically enhanced "cyborg body" or networked bodies of the digital realm.[3] Yet, this corporeal reading of infrastructure can be extended to include the material artefacts or technological systems that sustain life so that the city can be conceived as a body-technology nexus. We can also add a further layer of complexity derived from the digital blurring of the "material" and "immaterial": the "web" is not just an ethereal entity but is physically located in zones of extraction for rare earths and other elements required for the production of technological devices, the humming banks of servers that enable networks to function or handle the increasingly vast repositories of data, and also the accumulating piles of electronic debris that constitute one of the material and stratigraphic archaeologies of late modernity.

The question of infrastructure has also become linked in recent years to the rise of the resilience discourse as a focal point for new conceptualisations of urban disasters and dystopian futurology. To the corporeal, digital and material, however, we can add Manuel Tironi's reading of "vital infrastructures" as a different kind of engagement with disaster zones, where the question of "resilience" can be framed in relation to the endurance of the "ethical subject", different modes of living and the types of emotional sustenance provided by "relations and affections".[4] For Tironi, our choice of words and concepts is important because metaphors can bring different worlds into being and we should not lose sight of the affective realm within social and environmental discourse.

## *The Ideal City*

The ideal city has been a recurring focus of political and philosophical deliberation since the earliest large-scale human settlements. "What is the city?" asks Lewis Mumford, who notes that "No single definition will apply to all its manifestations."[5] In recent decades a number of suggestions have been put forward to characterise the contemporary urban arena including late-modern city, post-industrial city, post-modern city, global city, post-colonial city, post-secular city, digital city, smart city, and numerous other monikers. But what is a liveable city? What policy objectives or measurable parameters might frame a working definition? In terms of technology and infrastructure, the ideal city can evoke many different possibilities. If we take the example of temperature control through air conditioning, we encounter a technological system that is ostensibly placeless, yet highly differentiated in its diffusion. As Jiat Hwee-Chang shows in his study of architecture from a post-colonial perspective, the experience of air conditioning serves as a poignant indicator of socio-economic difference: the modernist euphoria surrounding such technologies, exemplified by figures such as Reyner Banham, must be tempered by the uneven technological landscapes that have evolved in practice.

From Hwee-Chang's perspective it is more apposite to regard cities such as Singapore as "thermally heterogeneous".[6] Rather than a "modernist imaginary" in which many cities of the global south are characterised as deviating from a European or North American norm, we are better served by what Jochen Monstadt and others have described as hybrid infrastructural landscapes comprising many different elements.[7]

## *The Limits to Design*

A significant tension in urban analysis exists between urban design and social policy. Whilst there is a long tradition in planning and architectural design of shaping cities, often connected with fields such as criminology and social psychology, a set of counter arguments emphasise the limited scope of "design" in relation to structural forms of social and economic inequality. The German sociologist Hartmut Häußermann, for example, notes how mobility between schools is more significant than design considerations in relation to educational outcomes.[8] How do human environments frame social capacities? In what ways can the built environment enable human creativity and interaction? To what extent can spaces and structures ameliorate or intensify social inequalities?

The role of nature in urban design discourse is now changing in response to at least three developments: first, fiscal constraints are threatening the labour-intense municipal landscapes of the past including parks, street trees and other established elements of metropolitan nature; second, emerging interest in the aesthetics of spontaneous nature is introducing new and unexpected elements in the intentional use of "non-design" or guided forms of spontaneity; and third, there is a new synthesis between the fields of ecology and engineering emerging at different scales, extending to influential developments such as "landscape urbanism". For Jane Wolff, drawing on her extensive expertise in the San Francisco Bay, we must now contend with novel kinds of "accidental landscapes" that rest on a different kind of synthesis between nature and culture and a series of dynamic re-interpretations of urban ecology.[9]

## *Cities and Urbanisation*

Cities can be regarded as a synthesis of nature and culture operating at a variety of spatial scales. The advance of "complete urbanisation", as postulated by the French urbanist Henri Lefebvre in the early 1970s, poses a series of questions about the distinction between cities, as conventionally understood, and the "non-city" or those spaces that lie beyond the city limits.[10] Do we need to rethink our understanding of the relationship between cities and technology? To what extent have publics become effectively "voiceless" in relation to sweeping socio-technological transitions and transformations? Does the rise of the so-called "technosphere" under modernity mark a corollary to the Anthropocene and the identification of humankind as a geological agent in its own right?

## *Cities as Incubators for Progressive Change*

The American poet and feminist writer Audre Lorde describes how "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self revelation".[11] Cities, and urban social movements in particular, have long served as the leading edge of progressive social and political change, in fields as diverse as education, health and human rights. In what ways can contemporary cities enrich democratic culture? Are cities still at the leading edge of social and cultural experimentation into different modes of living, and of living together in difference? The insights of urbanists such as Manuel Castells into the historical role of urban social movements, as a specific kind of vanguard for wider social transformations, remains relevant today. The research of Castells into, for example, the anti-fascist feminist movement of Madrid in the mid-1970s or the lesbian and gay activism of San Francisco during the late 1970s, provides significant parallels with contemporary forms of urban activism.[12]

## *Rethinking Urban Nature*

Cities have often been characterised as antithetical to nature; they have been widely presented as part of the destructive dynamic of modernity. At the same time, however, many of the most significant campaigns for environmental justice have emerged from within the urban arena: the campaigns against dioxins, lead paint, and more recently particulate pollution; the creation of parks and playgrounds in poorer neighbourhoods; and the extension of joy in biodiversity to excluded and marginalised communities. Rather than a generic threat to the biosphere, cities can be re-conceptualised as experimental terrains to enable new connections with nature and a re-imagining of the human place in nature. What if cities were to be re-conceived as living laboratories for the identification of new modes of living with nature? What if marginal spaces were revalorised as urban refugia for biodiversity, as elaborations of the public realm, and as integral components of the future city? Can radical conceptions of urban nature provide an alternative to the looming logic of geo-engineering or techno-managerial fixes for the environmental challenges of the future?

## *The Subject of the Future*

The human subject can no longer be taken for granted. The "public interest" is no longer a self-evident objective of policy making, if indeed it ever was, but rather a complex field of contestation and negotiation. The so-called "master plan", as M. Christine Boyer points out, had become both an anachronism and a chimera by the late 1960s, but we have yet to effectively articulate some form of urban totality that is fully sensitive to social difference.[13] The field of urban studies, broadly conceived, is characterised by a tension between simplicity and complexity. Many areas of work are marked by a new commitment to interdisciplinary research that spans not only the bio-physical and social sciences but also extends to insights from the humanities. The experience of cities is not singular but

multiple, it is criss-crossed by a series of social, spatial and temporal distinctions, so that the modern citizen must become skilled in practices of interpretation and negotiation. How will the future human subject experience urban space? What will they feel or perceive as they navigate the city of the future?

## *Pathways and Reflections*

One of the interesting themes to emerge from the workshop is the difficulty in defining the city as a focus of analysis or discussion. Recent years have seen an intense interest in developing better understandings of both the scale and characteristics of contemporary urbanisation. The inherently interdisciplinary scope of urban discourse also poses a challenge in terms of fostering wider dialogue: do we already have the words or conceptual tools that we need? Are existing urban lexicons and theoretical legacies sufficient to contend with the cities of the future? In particular, the idea of interdisciplinary work is not simply a matter of bringing data together from different fields or building ever more elaborate models. The conventional scope of multidisciplinary work, especially with respect to the urban environment, has been largely additive through various combinations of socio-economic and environmental data. If anything, the surge of interest in "big data" has served to occlude these underlying conceptual limitations. What is needed is a more historically informed understanding of the social and political dynamics of the urban arena so that different types of environmental change are viewed less as teleological outcomes but rather as alternative socio-technological pathways. The distinctiveness of the urban field is not in any case reducible to straightforward data sets but encompasses both the bio-physical and social dynamics of urban space. These might include epigenetic processes in the urban environment, including epidemiological aspects to human well-being, but might also extend to the historical dimensions to the urban arena as a crucial space of contestation and experimentation.

The interface between theory and practice generated much discussion at the workshop about the role and efficacy of different methodologies used in urban research. There was reflection, for example, on the significance of the researcher's own relationship to their object of study, not just in terms of social positionality, but also as an outcome of direct interaction with urban space. Emphasis was placed on the imaginative richness of ethnographic modes of enquiry, ranging from various forms of walking, "urban transects" or simply "being there", to the value of more intense and longer-term immersion in specific places and communities.[14]

Relating to the question of methodology is the challenge of writing and different means of communicating research findings to wider audiences. A particular priority is how we might re-connect academia with the public realm, fostering higher levels of interest and trust in scientific research. What ideas or vocabularies are capable of resonating with tired and distracted societies swamped by alternative and often unreliable sources of information?

If urban research can contribute towards the debunking of damaging myths that undermine social cohesion, then the re-framing of urban citizenship must move beyond the narrow politics of consumption and identity. In particular, the failure to tackle widening social inequalities, widely blamed on globalisation, has generated a toxic political arena within which many cities find themselves increasingly identified as a redoubt for more progressive approaches to public policy. In such circumstances, the idea of the "open city" carries powerful cultural and political resonance for different understandings of citizenship, community and social belonging.

# Notes

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

2 An audio recording of the panel discussion is available here: www.britac.ac.uk/audio/imagining-infrastructure.

3 See, for example, Ash Amin, "Lively infrastructures", *Theory, Culture and Society* 31 (2014) 7–8 pp. 137–161; AbdouMaliq Simone, "People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* (2004) 16 (3) pp. 407–429; and Matthew Gandy "Cyborg urbanization: complexity and monstrosity in the contemporary city", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2005) 29 (1) pp. 26–49.

4 Manuel Tironi, presentation given to the "Imagining Infrastructures" panel discussion at the British Academy, 6 March 2017. See also Manuel Tironi, "Atmospheres of indagation: disasters and the politics of excessiveness," *Sociological Review* (2014) 62 pp. 114–134.

5 Lewis Mumford, *The city in history* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961).

6 Jiat Hwee-Chang, presentation given to the "Imagining Infrastructures" panel discussion at the British Academy, 6 March 2017. See also Jiat Hwee-Chang, *A genealogy of tropical architecture: colonial networks, nature, and technoscience* (London: Routledge, 2016).

7 Jochen Monstadt, presentation given to the "Imagining Infrastructures" panel discussion at the British Academy, 6 March 2017. See Jochen Monstadt and Sophie Schramm, "Toward the networked city? Translating technological ideals and planning models in water and sanitation systems in Dar es Salaam", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2017) (in press).

8 See, for example, Hartmut Häußermann, *Großstadt: Soziologische Stichwörter* (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 2000).

9 Jane Wolff, presentation given to the "Imagining Infrastructures" panel discussion at the British Academy, 6 March 2017. See also Jane Wolff, *Delta primer: a field guide to the California Delta* (San Francisco: William K. Stout, 2003).

10 Henri Lefebvre, *The urban revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003 [1970]).

11 Audre Lorde, *Sister outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2013 [1984/2007]).

12 Manuel Castells, *The city and the grassroots* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

13 M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the rational city* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983).

14 Of particular interest here is Michele Lancione's ethnographic work with marginalised communities in Romania. See, for example, Michele Lancione, "The ethnographic novel as activist mode of existence: translating the field with homeless people and beyond", *Social and Cultural Geography* (2017) (in press).

# Appendix

## Habitat and Living in Plural Cities Workshop

7 March 2017

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

### Programme

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| 12.30 – 12.40 | **Opening Remarks**<br>Professor Matthew Gandy FBA, Professor of Cultural and Historical Geography, University of Cambridge |
| 12.40 – 14.10 | **Experiencing the Built Environment**<br>Moderator: Professor Matthew Gandy FBA<br>Professor Maren Harnack, Professor of Urban Planning and Design, University of Applied Sciences Frankfurt; Dr Manuel Tironi, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, P. Universidad Católica de Chile; Dr Jayaraj Sundaresan, Co-Director, Urban Fellowship Programme, Indian Institute for Human Settlements<br>*Open floor discussion* |
| 14.10 – 14.30 | Tea/coffee break |
| 14.30 – 16.00 | **Thinking Beyond Sustainable Cities**<br>Moderator: Professor Matthew Gandy FBA<br>Dr Ayona Datta, Reader in Urban Futures, King's College London; Professor Simon Marvin, Director, Urban Institute, University of Sheffield; Dr Michele Lancione, Lecturer in Human Geography, Cardiff University<br>*Open floor discussion* |
| 16.00 – 16.20 | Tea/coffee break |
| 16.20 – 17.50 | **Creating More Liveable Cities**<br>Moderator: Professor Ash Amin CBE FBA, Foreign Secretary & Vice-President, British Academy<br>Rachel Fisher, Head of Infrastructure, UK Department for Communities and Local Government; Dr Jiat-Hwee Chang, Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore; Dr Jane Wolff, Associate Professor, Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design, Toronto University<br>*Open floor discussion* |
| 17.50 – 18.00 | **Closing Remarks**<br>Professor Matthew Gandy FBA & Professor Ash Amin CBE FBA |

## Participant list

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

Dr Maan Barua
British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford

Dr Vanesa Castán Broto
Senior Lecturer, Development Planning Unit, University College London

Dr Jiat-Hwee Chang
Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore

Beth Clevenger
Acquisitions Editor, MIT Press

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

Professor Nick Dunn
Professor of Urban Design, Lancaster University

Dr Somaiyeh Falahat
Research Fellow, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge

Rachel Fisher
Head of Infrastructure, Cities and Local Growth Unit, Department for Communities and Local Government

Dr Des Fitzgerald
Lecturer in Sociology, Cardiff University

Professor Matthew Gandy FBA
Professor of Cultural and Historical Geography, University of Cambridge

Professor Maren Harnack
Professor of Urban Planning and Design, University of Applied Sciences, Frankfurt

Professor Caroline Knowles
Professor of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London

Dr Michele Lancione
Lecturer in Human Geography, Cardiff University

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the British Academy, but are commended as contributing to public debate.