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Cities and infrastructure in the Global South: introduction

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Reflections on urban infrastructure in these pages are drawn from eight of the seventeen research projects comprising the British Academy's *Cities and Infrastructure Programme.* Research teams from each project, without being prompted, have authored their articles collectively, demonstrating the collaborations they have built through their research and the dissemination of their results. A special issue of a journal populated entirely with the products of collective authorship may be somewhat unusual, but it expresses a way of doing intellectual labour and the spirit of the programme. Cooperation was built into this programme by requiring projects to work across disciplinary boundaries on common issues. Thus, and perhaps also unusually, the pages that follow hold the combined thinking of engineers of various stripes, cultural and physical geographers, climate and other kinds of scientists, archaeologists, seismologists, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists in various combinations. The most pressing urban issues of our time demand combinations of social, cultural and technical approaches. Beall *et al.* discuss some of the complexities these collaborations across domains of expertise entail.

The programme also required strong (global) North–South research links, and this, too, is demonstrated in collective authorship, with contributions from academics and activists in the Global South often taking a lead as experts in their own cities, but otherwise playing an equal part in the occasionally assembled, informal, cross-border academies that are effectively constituted through visits back and forth and the virtual communication that this type of intellectual and practical labour creates.

The cities under scrutiny in this special issue are Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Kathmandu and Bhaktapur (Nepal), Hanoi (Vietnam), Tamale and Accra (Ghana), Bar Elias (Lebanon), Lahore (Pakistan), Colombo (Sri Lanka), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Tacloban (Philippines). Researchers are drawn to these cities because they provide powerful examples of the issues they want to examine; because they have developed strong networks with local academic colleagues and activists; because they feel affective connections to them for all kinds of reasons. The cities that captivate them are cities that collapse—Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Tacloban—and where people must rebuild their lives; cities—Tamale, Accra and Hanoi—that show resilience and fragility in the heat and floods of climate change; cities—Rio de Janeiro—that are securitised

and segmented as favelas; cities—Lahore, Addis Ababa, Bar Elias and Colombo—where reveries of modernisation settle around the idea of *world cities* in which the poor and marginalised, often seen as obstructing pathways to modernity, are displaced in its cause.

All cities are unique in their aesthetics, in their arrangement of bodies and buildings, materials and flesh, in the lives that can be lived in them, and in the possibilities and aspirations they sustain (Knowles 2014). And yet cities also share similarities across these same domains. The cities under examination are, of course, cities in the Global South, their circumstances addressed by an emergent and vibrant scholarship characterised as southern urbanism (Amin & Thrift 2017, Graham & McFarlane 2015, Simone 2019, Simone & Pieterse 2017) precisely on account of their shared circumstances. These cities sustain the greatest concentrations of the poor and marginalised; who live in difficult circumstances they must daily invent for themselves. These are among the fragile and collapsing cities that are growing most rapidly and uncontrollably.

As cities expand and the world becomes increasingly urban, the informal (slum) parts of cities are, for a variety of reasons, growing the fastest. Informal populations in the Global South are predicted by the UN to rise from the current one billion to three billion by 2045, and the challenges city authorities face in providing even the most basic infrastructure for their populations will magnify beyond their current breaking point. The circumstances of women are still more pressing as some of the contributions in this volume, attuned to significant gender differences point out. Informal settlements are now a normal part of urban landscape (Amin & Thrift 2017). These circumstances make the need for research, problem solving and action more urgent than ever.

Despite the *vision* embedded in city authorities' five-year (or whatever time scale) top-down plans, sometimes drawn up in collaboration with international consultants, research shows that cities *actually work* from the ground up (Amin & Thrift 2017). In developing this perspective, the research reported in these pages offers a bottom-up everyday understanding of cities, viewed from the vantage point of popular neighbourhoods where the poorest and most marginalised populations are concentrated. Authors provide vivid vignettes that delve into lives, dispositions, ways of thinking about and inhabiting cities. What follows are views—taken from various angles—on the streets. These *street views* are inevitably small-scaled, particular, vivid, nuanced and map closely onto the lives, concerns and dispositions they seek to capture. They *talk back* to the city authorities that have failed to consult and incorporate views from the streets in urban reconstruction plans that have a profound impact on people's everyday lives.

Attending to street views in the Ghanaian cities of Accra and Tamale, Gough *et al.* explore what they call the climate–infrastructure–livelihood nexus from the

vantage point of how floods and rising temperatures impact the wellbeing of popular neighbourhoods. Beneath the radar of the Met Office flood warnings and overarching assessments of temperatures recoded at airports, the team measures temperatures in people's homes, workplaces and medical facilities. Enlisting the help of community champions, they survey local people to determine how flooding and extreme heat impact their ability to earn a living; and they ask health care officials how these conditions shape the delivery of effective health care services. Probing the climate–infrastructure–livelihood nexus revealed entry points for adaptations and solutions through the built environment; and identified how forecasting can reduce vulnerability to extreme weather in low-income communities.

From the same research project Kasei *et al.* evaluate the contribution of traditional knowledge about flooding, finding out what local people are already doing—how they prepare and respond—in mitigating flood damage and how their efforts could be better supported. The communities the team investigates, who live in informal (illegal) settlements in Accra and Tamale with intermittent clean water and no sanitation, are often seen as part of the problem by metropolitan assemblies. But the research suggests that they could be part of the solution. Their long-honed traditional knowledge of flooding is more granular and local than the Met Office's and much easier to understand. The team concludes on the need to work with the streets in providing climate-adaption strategies that are affordable, participatory and sustainable.

Paying close attention to the impact of road-infrastructure flooding on women's capacities to work and attend to family wellbeing, Scaparra *et al.* survey the experiences of the poorest residents and commercial visitors to Hanoi, such as drivers and market traders. As damage to public goods and personal losses make already difficult lives still more stressed, the teams learn that local residents are prepared to take action in clearing ditches and waterways, improving storage of food and planning, but want the city government to work *with* them on *their* priorities, which are about upgrading the drainage systems, road networks and solid waste disposal facilities that would improve their lives. There are, of course, limits to what communities can achieve without city-level intervention to improve the public goods of basic infrastructure.

Street views offer another story of eruptions and disasters. As Schofield *et al.* point out, the most common response to earthquakes and typhoons is something called *self-recovery,* the long-term rebuilding of shelter, social relationships and lives that follows the time-limited interventions of international disaster relief agencies and national governments. Research in Kathmandu following the 2015 earthquake and in Tacloban following Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 revealed that, in common with disasters elsewhere, the poorest communities are largely left to their own devices. Investigating the needs, experiences, priorities and perceptions of risk and environment of those affected, the team suggests that these should be at the centre of otherwise

top-down interventions. Identifying barriers to recovery among the poor in both cities through detailed interviews, the team discovered that official interventions in giving compensation aimed at supporting safer rebuilding practices benefitted better-off residents and increased the debts of the poor—and especially elderly and female-headed households—who were discouraged from investing resources in rebuilding by uncertainty over land tenure. Disaster recovery, they concluded, should work *with* the street and not impose solutions on it from above.

Exploring the biographies of monuments rather than people, Coningham *et al.* explore the ground beneath the spectacular monuments—Nepal's intangible heritage—that the Kathmandu Earthquake shook up and collapsed, providing a view from beneath the streets as the earthquake revealed the monuments' secrets. Complex phases of earlier cultural activity came to light, suggesting that the city was older than experts thought it was, and bringing new narratives of the past to popular attention. Equally importantly, earlier restorations provided an archive of what materials and building techniques were seismically robust, and a guide for current restoration practices. While the monuments were always part of the social architectures of everyday popular life, the team, working with Nepali experts in vernacular systems, residents, craftspeople, tour operators and business, re-engaged local communities in the discoveries of the earthquakes and in the future of the monuments. The earthquake museum, which allowed people to post their earthquake stories as part of its first exhibition, has proved popular with locals as visitor data show.

Abeyasekera *et al.* bring street views to the surface in the experience of dispossession in popular neighbourhoods in Colombo and Lahore in the cause of modernity. The clearance of densely populated neighbourhoods that made way for Lahore's new rapid transit Orange Line was sudden and brutal. With inadequate and variable compensation, people from poor neighbourhoods scattered into unfamiliar parts of the city to fend for themselves with huge disruption to the social networks that normally sustained them. Researchers collected their stories. They listened too to the stories of those who were relocated from poor central neighbourhoods, into new, poorly maintained, vertical slums on the periphery of Colombo. Both cities' stories are fed into popular resistance movements.

Beall *et al.* bring a street view to the surface on top-down initiatives implemented without consultation, in recreating Addis Ababa as a modern world-class city through two case studies. The first is the Chinese-built Leghar light railway station and interchange; the second a study of sanitation in Kotari Condominium, a large housing development built on the periphery of Addis where land is cheaper, for which a sanitation plant was built.

Going a step further and *activating* a street view in citizen participation and co-design of a small neighbourhood space in Bar Elias, produced a set of concrete

plans as an alternative to those of the planning authorities that rarely bother to consult. Cultivating through capacity building what they call 'citizen scientists' Mintchev *et al.* demonstrate the benefits of collective working around the needs and aspirations of the streets, even when this is complicated by the presence of strangers, in this case Syrian refugees, in a country (Lebanon) that has the world's highest per capita population of refugees. Translating the stories of the streets into plans for beneficial changes to the local environment is an important next step and an experiment in city thinking. Cities, as this and other projects show, are live laboratories for experimentation with what does and doesn't work.

Equally local, specific and concrete are the grass-roots food infrastructures Vradis and Bartholl describe from working with the residents of the Mare Favela in Rio de Janeiro. Food grinds a critical lens onto the prosperity of the streets—what could be more basic than the food people eat? Surveying the local food realities on the ground provided the team with close-up portraits of what Rio's poor eat. Alongside activists pursuing food sovereignty strategies in gardening, seeds, water and other humble activities, the power of agribusinesses can be in part unwound by these kinds of initiatives, which also reveal the crucial role of women in food production and family nutritional wellbeing.

What connects these stories from the streets? What are the *story lines*, as Simone and Pieterse (2017: xvii) refer to the channels that link stories, surfacing through the research that comprises this programme? In other words, what is the analytical value of the optics from the street? The answer, as I unfold it in the remaining pages of this introduction, is a granular and complex understanding of infrastructure that has the advantage of being actionable, and which offers other, non-hegemonic, more humanistic ways of thinking about cities and ways of living in them, lessons that translate between quite different kinds of cities.

Infrastructure is food production and the social-technical relationships that it entails (Vradis & Bartholl). Infrastructure is about the ways in which seeds and credit circulate and how water is distributed; it is about how planting and harvesting are practised; it is about who can grow what where, about who is able to make a call on land for the purposes of food growing. Infrastructure is always part of a bigger matrix, as this and a number of other projects reveal. What exactly infrastructure connects and how it does so are important questions that can be answered contextually. Gough *et al.* trace the impacts of climate change on the living and working conditions of the poor in reduced incomes, poorer health and stress on health facilities, loss of electricity supplies, contaminated water and so on. These complex, knotted, infrastructural assemblages (McFarlane 2011), corralled (or not) into pipes and cables alongside complicated, improvised, ways of making a living, converge to produce different qualities of life, health and wellbeing. Infrastructure then is about conjunction—as vital

conduits of life support are connected, if haphazardly, to the lives around which they converge. Infrastructure consisting in pipes, cables, secure housing, waste disposal and technologies of mobility in public transit systems—the rickety and unstable filaments that (might) hold cities together—surface in Colombo, Lahore (Abeyasekera *et al.*) and Addis Ababa (Beall *et al.*), all commonly understood domains of essential provision. But in each of these cities infrastructure is also about disruption and disconnection when people are torn between the social relationships on which they rely for survival and which are disrupted in forced moves; and the new possibilities in acquiring the trappings of modern urban life in waste disposal, better housing and rapid transit systems. Disruptions are evident in Kathmandu and Tacloban (Schofield *et al.*) where safer shelter comes at a cost in disrupting relationships with family and neighbours, in arguments over party walls and compensation, as well as the spiralling debt involved in rebuilding.

Ancient monuments (Coningham *et al.*)—which hold the rituals of everyday life together and bind heaven and earth in the objects and connections that people forge with their gods—are infrastructure too. Infrastructure is a feeling in this instance. Traditional knowledge about flooding (Kasei *et al.*) is infrastructure; these are ways of getting by; of making sense of the world and its ways; social architectures too hold everyday life together and make it navigable by those who depend on it in different ways (Amit & Knowles 2017).

That infrastructure is also a *politics of the city* is evident throughout this collection. A politics of the city—consisting in priorities in action and in the explicit or implicit hierarchies that rank divergent interests and ways forward, in ways of composing cities socially and architecturally—comes into force when the needs, lives and aspirations of some take priority over others. Vradis and Bartholl, Beall *et al.*, Adutt *et al.*, Coningham *et al.*, and Schofield *et al.* all provide vivid examples of urban politics in action.

In comparing Lahore and Colombo, which have different histories and traditions of state intervention in dealing with poor and marginalised populations, city authorities in Colombo do better than those in Lahore in providing housing for those whom it displaced in the cause of modernity (Abeyasekera *et al.*) While the city government of Lahore sent in the army and the bulldozers to dislodge those whose homes stood in the path of the new Orange rapid transit line, and the state absolved itself of responsibility for housing; city authorities in Colombo implemented a form of social engineering in which the poor were forced to learn to live in a new high-rise spatial order on the periphery of the city and not in inner-city slums. 'Regimes of dispossession [politics] matter', as the team suggests, and I could add, regimes also *make matter* in creating the substance of the city in specific ways and on particular terms. While the new residents of the Colombo periphery were unhappy with their

poorly designed new homes at a distance from all that was familiar, they were in a better situation than the scattered residents of Lahore who had to somehow reinsert themselves into the city with little help. Underpinning a politics of dispossession is the financialisation of urban land and the benefits—to landowners and developers—of land speculation. This is surely one of the story lines that connect urban stories in all cities North and South, and which could be regulated and softened if the political will to do so could be mobilised.

An alternative politics of the city and its infrastructure is activated in an intervention by the research team in Bar Elias, Lebanon, in an area with a high proportion of Syrian refugees (Mintchev *et al.*). Challenging the key principles of modernity in the concept of the world city and its joined up infrastructure prioritising connectivity and based on (uneven) economic growth and prosperity, the team operated from a politics of prosperity for all. Defining prosperity as living a good life in terms of health, wellbeing, environment, capacity building, education and economic prospects, the team asks: 'What does it take to bring people together in socially fragmented and culturally diverse urban settings?'; 'What is the role of infrastructure in driving or hindering prosperity in such communities?' Taking up Engelen *et al.*'s (2017) notion of 'grounded cities', they prioritised a 'foundational economy' of goods and services for collective welfare and collaborated with the local population and the refugees in Bar Elias, working out what this would mean to them and putting their version of collective prosperity into action in the co-design of one the city's key spaces. This collaborative politics of the city repositions infrastructure as underpinning a shared version of city life that is beneficial to all and arrived at through collaboration; something to be negotiated concretely in situ and in its specifics in time and place. In this context, infrastructure refers to assemblages of collective goods not assumed in advance but identified through a process of investigation.

This concept of infrastructure is attentive to both its shared and personal dimensions. It places human agency and subjectivities at the centre of what holds urban life together, acknowledging that people are experts in their own lives and concerns, while ensuring that those in diverse situations were included, because a street view is not inherently inclusive or democratic. This understanding of infrastructure activates optimism for a shared and prosperous future and, moreover, a future that in Lebanon involves living with war-displaced strangers and the differences they bring. In this understanding of it, infrastructure is affective and embodied; infrastructure is how people live, dream and aspire, an integral part of human existence. Infrastructure enables access to other people and possibilities. Infrastructure operates through the human agents that animate it and delivers humble forms of prosperity that can be accessed by all. Infrastructure then is what serves a democratic city organised around principles of social justice. Can this be scaled up and offered more widely as a way forward?

The storylines that connect these research projects are about what a city is and can be, seen through the lens of what infrastructure is and can be, when viewed from the streets. The storylines that run through these street stories are about life alongside a politics of land speculation and mass dispossession, as cities operate inside the logics of financialisation. Storylines are about the need to access bare essentials—water, waste disposal, secure housing, food, education and economic opportunities—and the politics and regimes that enable and disable access to these life essentials. They open a small space in which more democratically run and socially just cities are held together by infrastructure that delivers wellbeing and prosperity for the majority who live in marginal and popular neighbourhoods. Cities are animated by infrastructures that are in turn activated by the energy and agency of the people who live in them and who can see themselves in the city and its imagined futures.

These storylines are always specific in their details, but they also travel to other cities and translate into the lives that are lived everywhere. The storylines of the cities of the Global South apply in their own ways in cities in the Global North where public consultations are perfunctory or non-existent and where the logics of private accumulation and land speculation supersede the needs of the majority. North–South collaboration is a two-way process where important lessons about the mechanisms by which cities work can be learned by all.

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