THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: TOWARDS A NEW URBAN PARADIGM

THE ALTERNATIVES HERE AND GONE, AS IS THE GLOBAL SOUTH. THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF URBAN MAJORITIES

AbdouMaliq Simone

Senior Professorial Fellow, the Urban Institute, University of Sheffield

I. When we consider the Global South, to what do we refer?

None of the formerly normative conceptions seems sufficient. Those urban areas to which we usually attribute this designation have largely gone their own way, or the ways their particular articulations to the larger world – their dependencies and opportunities – have steered them. Different degrees of colonial imposition, different functions of global engagement, and different geographies of valuation have pushed certain processes of urbanisation to the fore in some regions and not others.

Mobilisations of popular sentiment and political commitment have both opened and foreclosed the elaboration of connectivities through which urban life takes shape. Varying state commitments to the economic and social transformations urbanisation sets in motion also speed things up and slow things down. Certainly, the viral capacity of a limited set of formats of inhabitation to replicate themselves at great speed, regardless of singular local textures and histories, demonstrates a totalising force sweeping long-honed practices of city-making off their feet. One can witness in the most impoverished countries significant swathes of upscale real estate investment. The creative energies, synergies and intersections of city life, collectively made, become increasingly abstracted: as formulae, locational advantage, buzz, and land rent. The urban now is converted into a value of financial speculation, something to be consumed at escalating prices.

While it may be impossible to retain the Global South as something that points to any sense of commonality, that in any respect exists as somehow apart, it may still be important as a necessary fiction or metaphor, a device that enables us to think through the urban in ways not readily suggested by the way we usually pay attention to the changes and problems we consider.

At the same time, to ask an urban Global South to posit a range of alternative urban futures is to once again ask that which has been systematically set up as something removed from the normative values of develop-

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ment, and thereby meant to demonstrate the universal salience of those values, to now save the world from the dire outcomes such values have wrought. In this way, both the logic and spirit of coloniality persist. When massive demographic shifts result in dense landscapes that are difficult to read and govern, when megaprojects replace quaint villages in a matter of a few years, and when radically disparate conditions of life are situated in close proximity to each other, urban crises are declared, and everyone scurries for programmes of sustainability. Regardless of how cities got to be this way, the purported remarkableness of human resilience or the immanence of disaster often clouds assessments of what takes place, of how all of the disparities, uneven developments, precarious and privileged populations are somehow "held" together within urban systems whose systematicity is difficult to pin down.

II. Urban South and Western city

Much of what is then seen of as urban South is subjected to and becomes a subject through the projection of a white sensibility that too easily concludes deficiency, ineptitude, insalubrity, on the one hand, and reformation and profitable opportunity, on the other. While some consider the use of the racialised notion of white sensibility to be too harsh or unfair, it is important to remember just how many urban spaces across the world were once considered to be "black".

Blackness designated populations, practices and spaces that were deemed to have little value, that required constant and extraordinary management, that exuded a fundamental opacity in how they functioned, and that were to be kept at a safe distance from where the real economy was generated, but at the same time to provide the cut-rate labour to keep that economy going.

Historically, the Western city existed as the locus through which certain of its inhabitants could reflect on their being as a singular prerogative untranslatable across other modalities of existence. The city was the place where human life was consolidated as the epitome of life in general. The city was for the human, and to be human was to maximise one's position, continuously demonstrating the capacity to go beyond the requirements of sheer survival. This required a notion of free will, of the ability to act freely amongst otherwise constraining interdependencies.

At the same time, this freedom necessitated relegating certain bodies to the status of property or dependents, capable of circulating only through the transactional circuits of economic exchange and valuation. The city was the place that formed a "we" unrelated to anything but itself. Yet this "we" was inscribed as the node whose interests and aspirations were to be concretised through the expropriation and enclosure of critical metabolic relations – relations to earth and atmosphere. The "we" as a commons thus becomes partial, both in the senses of incomplete and judgmental.

White sensibility implicitly understood and feared such partiality, as urbanisation fundamentally entails the intersection of forces whose dispositions can never be fully read or anticipated in advance. As a result of this partiality, passions and scenarios are generated, which fall outside predictability. These were often then attributed as characteristics to those

populating the bazaars, the popular neighbourhoods, barrios, and bidonvilles. They became embodiments of an ambivalent mixture of fear and desire, full of a dangerous liveliness that had to be kept far away, but yet indicative of a missing vitality that also had to be kept close – kept close in order to be kept at a safe distance.

III. Urban majorities

These are the urban majorities. I use the notion of majority not so much as a statistical matter but to emphasise the ways in which residents of many Southern cities were largely a composite of backgrounds, livelihoods, capacities and incomes. The black city was far from a homogenous mass but an intricately, largely self-composed arena of diverse ways of doing and making things. People pushed and pulled things and each other in all kinds of directions; alternations were key: between calm and conflict, between the authorised and freewheeling, between generosity and manipulation, between collective and individual effort. The rhythms of everyday life, of how things were passed along, of how things ebbed and flowed, were key to elaborations of some workable balance between all the divergent interests. Equity and fairness were eventualities worked out over time and not the criteria of efficacy in the present. The pretentions of civility never could substitute for the hard-fought determinations of residents to make their circumstances work for them as well as others, and this entailed tough bargains, accommodations and compromise. It required intimate connections with materials and natural elements, as well as toxicity.

But any definitive determination of what was taking place was often difficult to make when plots were being continuously agglomerated and divided, when commercial and residential uses of space were being interchanged and mixed, where rights of access and use were renegotiated outside of the strict formulas of property ownership. The messiness of the built environment persists in part because of the plurality of different efforts and the arrangements attempted to make these efforts fit. At the same time, the messiness is a limited and provisional guarantee for the plurality itself. It is a means of trying to ensure that different kinds of residents – not always or even usually equal in terms of their access to resources and opportunities – nevertheless have a way of substantialising claims, of making their presence felt, and of keeping open the possibility of continuously revising their livelihoods.

The cities of the majority are not just the outgrowths of striving bodies but collisions of materials and processes that generate impacts far from their initial sites and "steady states". They ramify across diverging tendencies. The operations of things in tandem, in high-density proximities, whereby they attract and repel, as well as leaving each other alone, are not tools grounded in the intentions of human inhabitants, aiding and abetting their survival and other aspirations. They do not simply exist as forms of technical supplementation to maximise the energies and capacities of these inhabitants. For if the technical were simply the supplementation of pre-existing proclivities, agendas, and capacities, how then could human inhabitants make use of things whose potentials, histories and actions are beyond human perspectives? So the ability to live with materials of all kinds and their unanticipated interactions was key to sustaining urban life, even as many governments woefully underfunded basic infrastructures.

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Whatever endless calibrations, compensations and conflicts may ensue from the intersection of bodies without clear prospects or visions, it is the persistent generosity of those bodies to provide the rudiments of a solid world – still easily swept away – that is the city. People will die needlessly in childbirth, crossing roads without light, in flooding from clogged drains, and in arbitrary violence, but at the same time, it is rare that anyone will be without a place, without a way to survive for another day. That place and day are guaranteed by no one, but effectuated simply by someone's openness to someone else, establishing an economy of transaction and rest.

The urban majority was, for the most part, an in-between (in-between the superblock and the slum), and would encompass salaried workers in public and service sectors, traders, artisans, sojourners, petty bourgeois entrepreneurs, industrial labour, racketeers, service workers of various skills, and low-level technicians. Thus, various professions, work, backgrounds, economic capacities, and livelihoods are entailed. At various historical junctures, this in-between will gravitate and become discernible through various social and political formations, such as class, race, or territorial identity. Specific shared interests and vernaculars of recognition will come to the fore that enable the articulation of particular demands and form an anchorage point or target for the application of particular policies, mobilisation and ideological engagement. But across most Southern cities, the relationship between a political subjectivity and the stabilisation of constituencies over time ebbs and flows, it is never entirely formed or dissipated, but porous and tentative.

Whether the efforts and endurance of such an urban majority are considered defining features of an urban South or not, or whether they are the features of particular urbanisation processes that have come to dominate everywhere, is less important than what we make of such histories now.

Many districts of poor, working and middle-class districts have been erased, built over with the now conventional fabric of high-end commercial and residential vertical towers. Those districts that remain do so within vastly different trajectories. Some are subject to too many demands, entrepreneurial networks that hold too many one-room operations, too many workers looking out for each other; others are sites for an incessant busyness, everyone attempting some scheme or another, usually short-lived, with high turnovers of populations and increasingly unaffordable locational advantages. Some slowly fade away into obscurity through institutional neglect.

As many have pointed out, much of the urban majority has been shifted to the periphery. Here, massive outlays of affordable vertical housing for the lower middle classes are interspersed with quickly assembled catchment zones for the urban poor, all of which intersect with an assortment of industrial land, relocated factories, ruined leisure zones, waste dumps, warehouses, and the vestiges of upscale gated communities. Most of the built environment is not built to last. Large estates of small pavilions that promised home ownership and fungible assets to the wage-earners are rapidly decaying and abandoned not even a decade after their completion. Populations are inserting themselves into the fuzzy interstices of no-man's lands produced by the exigency to further separate out the deserving from the non-deserving classes, alongside and underneath var-

ious transport infrastructures, land banks, and vast arrays of industrial and commercial spaces that are neither fully operational nor depleted. Here it is often difficult to know where things are heading, the proximities are too jarring, the average length of existence of any project becomes shorter and shorter, and large swathes of the built environment await eventual use and occupation that might never come.

IV. What futures face urban majorities?

Where once it might have been possible to make some kind of systematic use of the experiential histories of the majorities engaged in varying, tenuous and usually provisional forms of urbanism, it becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain what kinds of futures these histories have in store. The capacities for making and doing are increasingly constrained, hemmed in by prolific rules and regulations that render much of what was done in the past illegal, as well as the extensive commodity chains that have diminished local production systems. In a somewhat ironic fashion, the South derived its value from being without rules, the breaker of rules; subject to voluminous quantities of rules that were largely unenforceable, simply for show, or only to be selectively applied.

Its purported chaotic conditions may have been the basis through which rules in the Northern hemispheres were elaborated and legitimated. But the South was largely to stand outside of the rules, was often rewarded for its lack of compliance, where extractions of nearly anything could take place under the radar. Now it is subject to solutions that largely depend upon the creation and enforcement of rules and regulations. While enforcement may still be selective and rules applied as a means of shakedowns and extortion, municipalities everywhere seek to demonstrate their modernity and authority by extending the rules as the very rights of citizens.

Residents of Karachi, São Paolo, Mexico City, Manila, Jakarta, Baghdad, Cairo, Lagos and Johannesburg desire lives that are as stress free and prosperous as possible. They know that such aspirations are not possible unless they have recourse to viable ways to manage what can be expected from their efforts, to some rudimentary ability to foresee what is likely to happen to them if certain courses of action are pursued. So they do indeed know and respect the value of law, of the need to govern things. But the extent to which the particular rules and regulations that tend to be issued really grasp the ways livelihoods are made is another story. They tend to overlegislate and overstandardise, and thus overpenalise the range of practices residents feel are required to make continuous adapations and recalibrations in volatile urban environments. Exemptions and exceptions are too often simply political prizes rather than indications that normative frameworks are not up to the tasks of real governance. Instead of orienting themselves to a world that presents itself with some predictability and coherence, residents are compelled to address multiple parallel realities of varying degrees of "officialness" and predominance.

If the objective of rule-based systems was to ensure a level playing field, to give a workable sense of predictability as to the disposition of particular actions and a sense of stability to the fundamentally uncertain outcomes of urban transactions, it seems critical to understand how these tenuous

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outcomes were produced in the past and what kinds of sensibilities, orientations, negotiations, and understandings were at work. This means understanding how fractious intentions, plans and manoeuvres, messy political dealings, compensations for things gone wrong and continuous adjustments could produce affordable and intensely heterogeneous spaces of residence and commerce.

At the same time, we have to better understand how these practices for creating heterogeneous spaces can become a double-edged sword. Owners of printing shops, technicians, domestic workers, informal hawkers, local youth gangs, associations of imams at mosques, street sweepers and local power brokers do not simply have their own rules, sectors, domains and spaces, they also come to take on the realities of everyone else. This is part and parcel of their ability to do their job, stay in place, and then do something else when the time inevitably comes. This is what their capacity for adaptation brings about. On the one hand, bringing the others into one's own fold can help better synchronise the different things that take place in a given district. At the same time, however, different actors, feeling like they now have what they need from others, can be more inclined to go their own way, not really taking into consideration what others in the district are actually doing and being more prepared to "cut their own deals" with external actors. This is one area, then, where the maintenance or creation of local governance institutions has a critical role to play, not by enforcing a common set of procedures but in ensuring an ongoing sense of mutual responsibility that scrutinises every deal in terms of its potential implications for a given territory.

We also have to seriously ask to what extent can the predominant tropes of democracy, justice and citizenship continue to do the "work" of substantiating and sustaining human inhabitation across contemporary urban contexts?

For the human – as a generalisation from the specific genealogies, practices, and lifetimes of specific bodies, their thoughts and aspirations – requires a mode of enactment and regard that generates a *concrete experience*, not simply a conceptualisation, of the *common.*

What would urban humans be without the capacity to be enjoined on a level that exceeds the specificities of discrete and divergent lives, but yet incorporates these specificities as critical evidence of the *fact* of *human* existence? What do residents of contemporary urban regions have in common? Instead of institutions, such as shrines, associations and guilds, for example, acting as shelters from the tensions and uncertainties of the larger world, in many instances they still function as a way for individuals to enter that larger world, as a platform from which to engage with it, learn from it and shape it.

V. The *right to the city*: enhancing particular modes of belonging?

The common is not a reduction of complexity, it is not the equalisation of identities in some overarching trope such as citizenship, but the maintenance of many different pathways, enclosures and openings onto spaces and experiences that need not have either a common denominator or a

particular mode of belonging. What is important in urban life are less the characteristics of where people reside but rather how they pass through each other; the possibility of multiple encounters where nothing is deliberated or instrumental. This is how the right to the city is experienced in everyday life. The coordination of urban heterogeneity – the sorting out of bodies, activities and opportunities – relied upon local social institutions honed over the long run. These included religious institutions, unions and ethnic and guild associations. Increasingly, while many of these associations remain, they are shells of their former selves, unable to coordinate and cohere diverse residents who find themselves facing a much more direct, unmediated exposure to the complexities of urban systems. These systems themselves are opened up to uncertain connections with a larger world of financial flows, commodity chains, socio-technical apparatuses and political manipulations.

In cities where an increasingly youthful population deems the past irrelevant to the requirements of the future, where some no longer seek recognition and inclusion and others move from one project to another, doing the right thing largely means doing nothing at all. While aspirations for a successful life may prevail, significant numbers of young people who are indifferent to their own survival see the city simply as something to be grabbed now, regardless of the consequences. The intricate fabrics of social care and support that sustained volatile ways of life in the past, which enabled a workable sense of collaboration even in contexts that were heavily conflictual, have become strained and often ineffective. Devices such as local economic development and local democracy become untenable for those who have no desire to stay in place, who are always on the move, even if the circuits of movement are themselves quite limited.

Given this, certain practices employed by residents to work with this heterogeneity in the current context of greater uncertainty might be viewed as a kind of "politics", but are actually largely speculative and thoroughly entangled with large measures of risk and affect dispositions which are often unclear in terms of the interests served and the futures produced. They rely upon what I call a practice of "anticipation" which, although imbuing various instantiations of local collective life with flexibility and innovation, can also dissipate the energies and commitments of residents into a multiplicity of uncoordinated initiatives and "experiments". Planning therefore remains important as a means of trying to sort through and interweave these anticipations into viable representations and projects.

Increasingly, "urban future" sounds like a cruel oxymoron. The urban world has produced a situation where the future looms as an endgame, particularly for those who live in cities whose originally siting was undertaken for quick evacuations of precious cargo. Salvation through infrastructure may be technically feasible but always confronts an untenable bottom line.

For the time being, it is critical to reconsider all of the measures undertaken in the names of health and safety, development and modernity, efficiency and cost-effectiveness, and conduciveness to investment in order to assess their medium-term implications for residents who in most cities of the world have seen only marginal gains in their living conditions. This is not to say that regulatory policies are either detrimental or unnecessary but rather they should be assessed in terms of what they facilitate and

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preclude. For example, with the exception of the most polluting industries, there is little reason for the separation of residence and commerce. The inflation of nuisance to become a determinant factor in whether or where certain activities should take place often constitutes a costly spacing out of functions as well as contributing to informationally impoverished environments.

With all of the purported concern for public space, the realisation of active publics can still largely be found in the seemingly haphazard, incomplete and strewn-out arrangements of buildings, infrastructure and activity that continue to persist in many cities. This environment provides a visible rendering of what things are and what people have to deal with in sustaining a viable residency. It shows how water and power appear and disappear, what bodies and objects manage to get through in order to encapsulate themselves in a sense of individual agendas and aspirations; it shows the terrain, conditions and conjunctions in which the changing projects of people and things try to get along – not always very successfully.

It shows how residents criss-cross and sidestep the markings and sediments of many different movements, constituting a place always signalling its availability to deals, small initiatives and grand designs. Instead of focusing on "straightening out the city" or putting things in their "proper place", it is important for spatial organization to show how residents, materials, infrastructures and built environments shape each other, step through and around each other day in and day out. Here what is important is the ability of residents to see how their aspirations and daily activities impact upon their environments, and these environments in turn shape what they sense, feel and deem to be possible.