
Appendix 2: Ryan Bishop

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO OCCUPY
THE HOUSE OF YOUR ENEMY?**

Thoughts on the megacities colloquium in Johannesburg

This essay provides an overview of the major themes explored by the participants of the *Johannesburg and Megacities Phenomena* colloquium hosted by the University of Johannesburg and *The New Encyclopaedia Project*. The event primarily emphasised the various ways in which megacities as a worldwide urban phenomenon has supplanted the idealised global city as the most prevalent form of urbanisation operative today. The shift has caused serious reconsideration of many assumptions underpinning urban studies and urban development. The results of this situation have its effects within those disciplines that engage with urban processes but also for the production and circulation of global knowledge generally. Several disciplines were represented (e.g., architecture, fine art, urban studies, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, and history) at the colloquium, as were a range of practices (e.g., academic, architectural, artistic, public works, governance, and activism), all in the service of attempting to render more complex, nuanced interpretations, and encompassing the urban processes of megacity formation.

What has happened to the model of urban development, the grand brass ring that all governmental boards, planners, architects and civic leaders attempt to grasp, the one desired and targeted by so many urban formations: the global city? That standard bearer of city aspirations that underpinned so much urban thinking, theory and practice in the 1990s, disappeared from sight, and newer, more complex, and less sanguine urban processes filled the city's horizon.

By the early 1990s the status of knowledge about cities has reached a critical limit, represented graphically by the inability of observers to project patterns of urban growth accurately or with any consistency. Projections were regularly revised as conditions changed and reliable information became harder to acquire. The economic model of the global city was inadequate for predicting the future of the world's cities. The non-western cities exhibit growth rates and forms of economic dynamism that have become the envy of urban planners despite all their negative side effects. Concerns over regulation and attempts to maintain sustainable linear growth give way to unregulated urban spread on massive scales, as traditional economic models yield to non-linear dynamic systems. What has changed about urbanism over the past decade and a half, and why has it changed so rapidly?

These are the questions and processes that led the editorial team of *The New Encyclopaedia Project* (NEP) to turn their attention for the second volume to urban processes, these and the ineluctable reality that the production, circulation, and legitimisation of knowledge is an urban-based process. Because the first volume of the NEP was entitled *Problematizing Global Knowledge*, and used the concept of 'global knowledge' as a base for critiquing knowledge production generally – and the idea of global knowledge specifically – the editorial team saw an undeniable interconnection between the critical challenges of knowledge production and the emergent forms of urbanisation that have surprised contemporary urban theorists. The editorial team (composed of Mike Featherstone, Couze Venn, John Phillips, and Ryan Bishop) initiated the agenda of the second volume, *Megacities: Problematizing the Urban*, over two years ago, and have held colloquia on the topic in various sites related to the issues at hand, including Hong Kong, Beijing, Kaifeng, London, and Tokyo. They have plans to conduct similar events in numerous sites in South America, the Middle East, and Asia. Africa, too, had to be on the agenda, and Johannesburg was a site we had long discussed and wished to visit.

Thus the event at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), organised by Leora Farber under the auspices of the UJ Research Centre, *Visual Identities in Art and Design*, filled a number of strategic desires held by the NEP editorial team, especially as the colloquium included strong participation from scholars all over South Africa, including the University of Cape Town, University of Stellenbosch, University of Pretoria, and the University of Witwatersrand, as well as international academics. But more importantly, the colloquium modified and refined the larger intellectual agenda of the volume in specific ways. With several disciplines represented (e.g., architecture, fine art, urban studies, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, and history) by a range of practices (e.g., academic, architectural, artistic, public works, governance, and activism), the colloquium met the most important part of the agenda: to widen, specify and render more complex the processes of megacity formation. And it is to these that I wish to direct this abbreviated set of reflections.

Although the primary focus of the colloquium was Johannesburg in relation to South Africa and other African cities, various presentations and discussions also widened the context to include urbanisation processes in China, the Middle East, and elsewhere globally, thus providing ever-expanding contextual frames of and for the local; frames which create the conditions that make the local and global respectively what they are. One of the most important frames for discussing urban phenomena is, obviously, the discursive, and the colloquium opened with Couze Venn articulating the necessity of critical engagement with the terms and concepts we use when thinking about and discussing the urban. Sarah Nuttall returned to this point in her closing remarks by suggesting the urban epistemological implications offered by a metropolis such as Johannesburg for an international audience are profound in so far as they can and do provide an original voice for the discussion of urbanisation. The hermeneutics of the city, she continued, have long been one of depth, of getting below the surface; Eyal Weizman, however, had considered in his presentation a way of reading the Gaza Strip conflicts as primarily contending with the actual and symbolic effects of the surface.

Weizman took his previously conceived trope about the politics of verticality and concentrated all of its evocative and actual power to the few centimetres above and below ground level, a surface that can be expanded to other surfaces as well. Such an extension was offered earlier in the colloquium by Amanda du Preez, who discussed the extreme urban sport known as *parkour*, which uses computer game aesthetics for moving across surfaces of the city in ways not regulated by civic or corporate

bodies, thus becoming an articulation of social critique. The struggles for power in urban sites, of economic and inhabited contention, the fields of conflicts that help constitute megacities – Weizman argues – can be found operating within this surface, which led Nuttall to suggest a more secular, horizontal reading, or a spliced reading, of cities via their surfaces. Weizman's move to think of the surface as the site of symbolic and actual contestation also achieves the trick of reading the vertical and the horizontal at the same time; it provides access to both surface and depth simultaneously. Similarly, Hannah le Roux considered the extended relationship between planning and violence in the use of 'junk spaces' or 'spaces of indeterminacy' in Johannesburg, which complemented as its negative image the work offered by Li Shiqiao on the drive for planning and safety in Hong Kong. These and many other contributions, directly addressed the following questions that Nuttall asked in her summation: what other rhetorical dimensions emerge when we begin to think along these lines, and what fugitive meanings might be found once we explore alternative discursive formations?

To begin to get at these formations that could potentially prove more useful for evoking current conditions than traditional terminology allows for discussing the megacity, we might consider some rather traditional binarisms that emerged in the discussions, ones that are difficult to escape and that can provide springboards for the kinds of hermeneutical queries proffered by Venn and Nuttall. The problems with binarisms are blatant in their obvious essentialisation, reductivity, and simplicity, yet they remain powerful, productive tools for knowledge formation – hence their appeal and a need to be wary of them. Several come to the fore when considering megacity phenomena, and they arose during the colloquium, but rather than considering them as binarisms, approaching them as poles of differing continuums became the most common strategy. These include:

- the visible and the invisible
- built and unbuilt environments
- material and non-material conditions
- representation and evocation
- danger and safety
- change and stasis
- diachronic and synchronic
- surface and depth
- vertical and horizontal
- preservation and destruction
- virtual and actual
- traditional media and IT-based media
- flows and blockages.

One way of tracing the shift from global city aspirations to megacity conditions, as proposed by Scott Lash, is to move one's attention away from the *flows* lionised by, and useful for, global cities in the production and circulation of capital, and shift it to the *blockages* of these processes in many megacities. Lash asserted that the flows can and do remain, but rather than being flows of homogeneity as often conceptualised in the literature, we now see primarily flows of heterogeneity.

The problematic notion of flows in pro-global city analysis is emblematic of the staid and stale thought surrounding urbanisation, which is increasingly being addressed by policy planners and urban theorists through the apparatus of ownership and property rights. It is precisely this kind of mechanical engagement with the dynamics of urban processes – especially in sites outside of North America and Europe – that the NEP volume wishes to take to task and to which Lash alluded. Similarly, Edgar Pieterse's presentation urged that ways of examining urban governance should be found that avoid regurgitating neo-Marxist analyses, which tend to be too economist and post-Fordist/welfare-state-directed, as well as those that can dodge the Foucauldian perspectives of governance. In his densely contextualised view of Johannesburg's issues of unemployment and governmental representation, Pieterse attempted to theorise the import of the region and the rural areas surrounding Johannesburg; this was to render fully evident the limitations of the standard rote engagements with urban governance in the South African context.

Useful heuristics for deploying alternative views of urban processes of the past that might provide ways for thinking through megacity processes were posited by different participants. Two worth noting were AbdouMalik Simone's 'black urbanism' and Eyal Weizman's 'molecular level change', the latter of which evocatively corresponded in harrowingly depressing ways, with the Fietas site and the work being done there by Thorsten Deckler. Simone argued that the dearth, or even death, of urban social movements in the current moment could be countered by drawing on a plainly evident, though somewhat covert, history of urban social engagement that he called 'black urbanism'. This strategy could be employed as an 'inventive methodology' that acquires a rhetorical force emerging from a constellation of historical and political experiences in many diverse temporal and spatial sites. The 'black' in 'black urbanism' need not be racial, though it often has been, but rather evokes a range of experiences of those people who are over-regulated by the administrative forces of urban processes, and excluded from their benefits at the same time. The paradoxical nature of inclusion and exclusion for which black life acts as a metonymy means

that it functions as a switch or a relay operating within and altering the dynamics of urban processes, and thus also as a way to understand these very processes. Yet, over the decades, many individuals and groups have found ways to live within the cracks, to transform the precariousness of their lives into a force for social change, often by not sticking to the demands of calculation and risk analysis, but by a commitment to the ineluctable power of incalculable actions.

There are many histories that are relevant here, multiple narratives of negotiating the patchwork of differing logics of rule, as Achille Mbembe noted in his response to Simone's paper. Mbembe further remarked that Simone's strategy reminds us of the consistently futural dimension of the city, its appeal as a site for potential social and individual transformation. The city is defined by its outside, what is 'to come' but which we know perhaps never will. In this sense, urban formation is always about the relationship between the material and non-material labour of daily life, and how these provide a means for different temporalities to occupy the same space. We will return to this point.

Weizman's 'molecular level change' centres on the house as a social, geopolitical unit for the occupation and eventual reclamation of the Gaza Strip, opening up a set of questions – at the smallest free-standing unit level – of the relationship between architecture and the pragmatic as well as symbolic use of buildings. Through negotiations about post-occupation use of homes, through ways of imagining tentative possible futures by thinking spatial constructs, Weizman asked the provocative question (and challenge) "What does it mean to occupy the house of your enemy?" Clearly this has resonance for a number of sites around the world, not least of them Johannesburg. Thorsten Deckler's architectural firm is attempting to rehouse a site that was once a neighbourhood (Feitas) that countered apartheid rule to such an extent that it was subsequently bulldozed. Weizman asserts that the standard response of Palestinian politicians to the question is simply to not live in those houses and to unbuild the environment through a similar deployment of bulldozers, the result of which would be an ecological disaster of chemicals released into the ground through the toxic rubble.

The Draconian bulldozing practices deployed by the Israelis in Jenna, as well as by the apartheid government in Fietas, and the Palestinians in Gaza, are repeated around the world in equally fraught and symbolically precarious relations, especially in megacities and the practices of slum clearance. Interpreting the houses as orbits of extraterritoriality or as potentially liberated sites for reimagining potential futures leads us to confront the powers latent in

the molecular and the surface. It forces an understanding of the political claims on all spatial forms, leading us to consider urban processes in ways less encumbered by the traditional claims and terms of global growth, peace and posterity, without giving them up as ideals guiding action and practice.

Another increasingly interesting and innovative way of examining cities that emerged in the colloquium was to eschew a myopic concentration on space that urban studies have long valorised to include a more extended consideration of time in the forms of different temporalities occupying the same or proximate spaces. Urbanisation processes entail archiving their former manifestations, some of which appear in the present or gesture towards a future; as urban population patterns change, the built environment increasingly reveals the values of governance and economic power and resistance (the contested surface of the city) in such ways that city blocks might be seen as displaying the layers of a geological shelf turned horizontal and rendered architectural. The skin of the city carries diachronic and synchronic traces of contestation and imagined hope. Such an approach to the city allows the historical its due without reducing all events to historical conditions but to the conditions of possibility operative within historicity, which is far less deterministic. Megacities as the markers of the future, as the city already outside itself, point the way to an extended reconsideration of urban processes now and in the near future, as well as prompting some serious questions about what the city might have been – might have always been – we just did not know it or recognise it as such.



fig 1 Presentations at the colloquium

