

The Urbanism of Exception

This book challenges the conventional (modernist-inspired) understanding of urbanization as a universal process tied to the ideal-typical model of the modern metropolis with its origins in the grand Western experience of city-building. At the start of the twenty-first century, the familiar idea of the ‘city’ – or ‘urbanism’ as we know it – has experienced such profound mutations in both structure and form that the customary epistemological categories and prevailing conceptual frameworks that predominate in conventional urban theory are no longer capable of explaining the evolving patterns of city-making. Global urbanism has increasingly taken shape as vast, distended city-regions, where urbanizing landscapes are increasingly fragmented into discontinuous assemblages of enclosed enclaves characterized by global connectivity and concentrated wealth, on the one side, and distressed zones of neglect and impoverishment, on the other. These emergent patterns of what might be called enclave urbanism have gone hand-in-hand with the new modes of urban governance, where the crystallization of privatized regulatory regimes has effectively shielded wealthy enclaves from public oversight and interference.

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The Urbanism of Exception

The Dynamics of Global City Building in the Twenty-First Century

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Preface

Over the past decade or so, increasing numbers of scholars operating within the broad field of critical urban studies have struggled with how to break away from the reigning paradigms and axiomatic regulative principles that have dominated theories of urbanization since at least the 1960s, if not before. This book originated as a response to this intellectual challenge that called upon scholars to make sense of the changing contours of urbanism and urbanization on a global scale at the start of the twenty-first century. Precisely what long-standing ideas like “the city,” “urbanism,” and “urbanization” refer to, and what they mean, have become increasingly blurred.

As a general rule, conventional understandings of the processes of urbanization in the modern age of industrial capitalism operated on the deeply held belief that leading cities in the core areas of the capitalist world economy created the basic template for city building everywhere throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even earlier. This imitative impulse bordering on outright plagiarism was particularly acute in the cities built under the yoke of European colonial rule.¹ Yet at the start of the twenty-first century, the term *urban* no longer suggests, as Ilka Ruby and Andreas Ruby have so eloquently put it, “a normative cultural concept – such as expressed, for instance, in the ‘European City.’” Instead the idea of “the urban” opens up a Pandora’s box of “extremely varied” ideas and conceptualizations shaped by the intersection of all sorts of geographical, socioeconomic, cultural, and political pressures. If we want to truly understand what it means to talk of urbanism at the start of

¹ For an excellent treatment of the export of European building practices to colonial cities, see Mia Fuller, *Modernists Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

the new millennium, “we have to capture it in all its disguises, gradations, and transformations occurring simultaneously on a global scale.”²

The point of departure for this book is what Ilka Ruby and Andreas Ruby have referred to as “a double failure”: on one side, the inability of the master narrative of modernism (and its kindred spirit named “modernization theory”) to subject our understanding of urban realities to the singular, reductive model of the ideal-typical *modern metropolis* with its origins in the grand Western experience of city building; and, on the other side, the inadequacy of the largely romanticized postmodernist call for a return to a kind of idyllic, small-scale, and manageable urbanism that is nostalgically imagined from a “past that never [really] existed.” In other words, when the all-too-familiar idea of the “city” – or “urbanism” as we know it – experiences profound and exaggerated mutations in structure and form, then the object itself becomes invisible to our customary epistemological categories and prevailing conceptual frameworks. The profound shifts in the evolving patterns of global urbanism have taken place in not so self-evident ways that make it nearly impossible to detect or grasp when we depend exclusively on conventional ways of knowing. As the prevailing paradigmatic approaches to understanding urbanization as a process and a condition have proven to be largely incapable of registering “differences” in ways that do not involve (almost by definition) ranked hierarchies of superiority/inferiority and normative judgements about “leading” and “lagging” cities, we need to adopt a new language of global urbanism that enables us “to embrace the city” in all its diversity and complexity in ways that do not correspond with a single perspective or “conform to one universal model.”³

One underlying aim of this book is to problematize and unsettle the very idea of “the city” itself, what constitutes its essential structure and form, and where to locate the boundaries between the urban and nonurban. To make sense of global urbanism at the start of the twenty-first century requires us to cast our gaze upon vast, distended global city-regions without a recognizable, singular, and dynamic urban core, where metropolitan landscapes are increasingly fragmented into distinct zones characterized by concentrated wealth, global connectivity, excess, and fantasy, on the one side, and neglect, impoverishment, and deprivation, on the other. These polar extremes exert a counterbalancing gravitational force, pulling at cities and fragmenting urban landscapes into terrains of difference that are largely unequal and disconnected. The steady accretion of deterritorialized enclaves of concentrated wealth linked with global flows of capital and finance have come into existence as relatively isolated nodes connected with the world-at-large through up-to-date telecommunications, luxury accommodation, and world-class transportation linkages. These

² Ilka Ruby and Andreas Ruby, “Forward,” in Ilka and Andreas Ruby (eds.), *Urban Transformations* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2008), pp. 10–13 (quotation from p. 12).

³ Ruby and Ruby, “Forward,” p. 12. See also Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

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sequestered enclaves are surrounded by myriad sites of abandonment and deprivation where ordinary residents are partially, if not completely, excluded from incorporation into the mainstream of urban life.

Building a relational urban theory that approaches the “urban question” through the lens of “organized complexity” challenges the core principles of modernist thinking, a mode of thought that conceives of urban space as a deliberately engineered configuration of discrete zones arranged around their specialized functions. From the start, the goal of modernist planning was to create predictability, permanence, and order out of the instability of everyday urban living. Looking at cities as ever-changing “works-in-progress” that assume an actual existence through connections between a complex multiplicity of urban assemblages (building typologies, associations, interpersonal networks, districts, neighborhoods) offers an alternative to modernist-inspired approaches to urban theory and planning practice.⁴

Despite the postmodernist praise for the seemingly random heterogeneity of urban environments and the celebration of the serendipitous, playful qualities of urban life, the unfolding patterns of urbanization in the contemporary age of neoliberal globalization largely correspond with a spatial ordering of urban landscapes that is far from the self-reflexive eclecticism and carefree “anything goes” ethos of postmodernity.⁵ While it is true that “the clearly defined spatial hierarchies of pre-industrial and industrial cities” of the past have declined in significance, city-building efforts at the start of the twenty-first century largely conform to distinctive spatialized logics that have put into motion new patterns of urban fragmentation and dispersal. These logics are clearly distinguished from modernist normative fixation on land-use zoning – a regulatory framework that “prescribed a form of urban spatial order [rooted] in the idea of a structured arrangement of the different basic functions which supposedly constitute[d]” the ideal modern metropolis.⁶ Compared to this modernist logic, which actually managed to partially shape the spatial form of cities during the twentieth century, the “anti-planning” gestures of postmodern urbanism at the start of the twenty-first century seem to suggest the paradigmatic opposite to the orderly structured form of the modern metropolis. However, behind this contrived image of layered pastiche, nonconformity, and “pure contingency,” there exists a different organizing principle that has produced a distinct kind of geographical order: the discontinuous and uneven spatiality of an “urban

⁴ See Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* [Revised Edition] (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), pp. 1–4, 13–20; and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 66–99.

⁶ Stavros Stavrides, “Occupied Squares and the Urban “State of Exception: In, Against and Beyond the City of Enclaves,” in Estela Schindel and Pamela Columbo (eds.), *Space and the Memories of Violence: Landscapes of Erasure, Disappearance and Exception* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 231–243 (esp. pp. 232, source of quotation).

archipelago.” The makeshift assemblage of disconnected enclaves that comprise this patchwork city consists of a jumbled montage of island-like spaces only loosely connected one to the other. Cobbled together in ways that seem to defy the familiar patterns of the formal legibility which characterized the modernist impulse, the “city of enclaves” resembles a random assortment of “spatial enclosures,” which themselves constitute “self-contained worlds with recognizable boundaries,” and which are dispersed haphazardly across spatially uneven landscapes.⁷ This emergent “post-urban” moment brings together new patterns of urbanization that have broken free from the rigid formality and rational orderliness of modernist city building.⁸

Another aim of this book is to unpack and expose these centrifugal forces that have brought about new kinds of “disaggregated urbanism” on a world scale. While these emergent patterns of spatial fragmentation and splintered urban form signal what might be considered only provisional and tentative steps into an-as-yet unknown urban future, the impulses toward disaggregation are sufficiently powerful to warrant serious attention. As “stand-alone” entities roughly inserted into urban landscapes without much forethought into the overall consequences, the “city-as-zone” and its mirror image – the “zone-as-city” – are geographically demarcated territories that establish differential forms of governance along with largely private regulatory regimes that shield them from unwanted public oversight. While self-governing enclaves and planned utopian experiments with city building are certainly not new, what distinguishes the bewildering patchwork of such disconnected spaces at the start of the twenty-first century is not only the sheer scale and scope of their impact on urban landscapes around the world, but also their association with the enterprise culture of market-driven hypercapitalism.

The contradictory dynamics of what might be called enclave urbanism, or the “urbanism of exception,” represent the tentative beginnings of a new era of urbanization on a global scale at the start of the twenty-first century. For the past two to three decades, scholars, journalists, and policy advocates have drawn our collective attention to the shifting contours of urban transformation on a global scale. In countless numbers of ways and in various venues, they have launched penetrating critiques of the worst excesses of global urbanism through exposure, illustration, and example. Bits and pieces of this unfolding story, which combines the geographical spread of planetary urbanism, the eclipse of modernist planning, city building as the aggregation of enclaves, the unbundling of territorial sovereignty, the proliferation of autonomous zones, and the implantation of what might be called concessionary urbanism have

⁷ Stavrides, “Occupied Squares and the Urban State of Exception,” pp. 232–233 (source of quotation).

⁸ Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), p. 299. See also Douglas Kelbaugh, *Repairing The American Metropolis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

appeared in scholarly research, visual imagery, photographic montages, journalistic accounts, and popular essays. What this book offers is an integrated synthesis that brings together these disparate microstories in a more overarching and comprehensive treatment of the opening stages of a new phase of global urbanism. The tentative emergence of this new kind of city building – the makeshift patchwork city of discontinuous enclaves – cuts unevenly across the familiar categorical distinctions between Global North and Global South, First-World City versus Third-World City, and West versus the Rest. Taken at face value, these customary dividing lines still help us to grasp the variety of “urbanisms” and the diverse experiences that characterize the historical unevenness of unfolding urbanization on a global scale. However, these conventional classificatory schemes can actually obscure deeper, subterranean structural dynamics that work to connect global urbanism at the start of the twenty-first century.⁹

The arguments that I offer are supported by stitching together a *mélange* of illustrative examples, vignettes, and singular anecdotes about particular cities and places. This mixture of micro-stories functions as a lens through which to grasp the dynamics of urban transformation at work at the start of the new millennium. Rather than seeing these seemingly odd places as discrete objects or disconnected and unrelated monadic particularisms, I treat them as visible manifestations – and interdependent instances – of imbricated processes bound inextricably together in ways that are often not immediately evident. As a kind of deliberate tactic, I have selected extreme (seemingly “outlier”) cases because, as Saskia Sassen has argued, “They make sharply visible what might otherwise remain confusingly vague.”¹⁰ These extreme cases serve as exemplary expressions of largely invisible structural processes at work in building cities for the future. The steady multiplication of these exceptions and exemptions that give rise to more and more “extreme cases” has exposed the limitations of our familiar analytic frameworks, and thus has rendered our long-standing fixation with finding the singular logic, the universal rule, or the essential driving force behind the processes of urbanization a global scale no longer useful and increasingly out-of-date.

⁹ These ideas are derived from a reading of Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the World Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 5–6.

¹⁰ Sassen, *Expulsions*, p. 1.

Acknowledgments

Scholarly research and writing never take place in a vacuum. We all owe a tremendous debt to scholars whose ideas influenced our own thinking, and to friends, family, and colleagues who were often drawn inadvertently into dialogue and conversation. This book originated out of a long and drawn-out critical engagement with the spatial configuration of Johannesburg in the post-apartheid era. I gradually came to realize that Johannesburg is not one city, but many cities occupying and competing for the same geographical space. In so many ways, the fractured urban landscape of Johannesburg consists of a hybrid collection of disconnected enclaves that create almost hermetically sealed social worlds. Those who use and inhabit these cocooned spheres typically do not engage in meaningful and intimate social interaction with those on the “outside.” This observation led me to cast my gaze more broadly onto the global terrain, and to critically explore how city building at the start of the twenty-first century has largely moved along pathways quite different than the trajectories that characterized the modernist urbanism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Urbanism of Exception is a work of synthesis. I have tried to weave together the research and writing of others in order to create a rather grand story that captures what is happening with global urbanism in the age of late modernity. Hopefully, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Over many years, I have engaged in countless conversations about the ideas in this book with numerous colleagues, but Anne Pitcher, Garth Myers, Idalina Baptista, Gavin Shatkin, and David Bieri stand out as key persons with whom I drew into dialogue about the themes that I explore in this book.

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