



Eurozine Editorial

The city as stage for social upheaval

For the sociology of the early twentieth century, the city, which in the course of industrialization had undergone rapid expansion and whose development was concurrent with that of sociology itself, was the "laboratory of the modern". Sociologists of the city focused above all on processes of social segregation observable in the urban space.

The twenty-first-century city, on the other hand, reflects disparities on an international scale that result from structural changes in employment and refugee movement: while the shrinking city is a phenomenon in former industrial regions, megacities develop in Third World regions undergoing transition from rural economies. Concepts such as "edge cities", "creative cities", and "informational cities" point to the city's functional shift, which appears to bear the imprint of a new relation between production, space, and society.

In the social structure of the city space itself, it is possible to observe diverse and diverging fragmentations of life-worlds determined by competing processes of exclusion and inclusion. Gated communities and no-go areas, poor districts and the gentrification of inner-city space, the erosion of informal systems and social networks, and the rise of new strategies for survival (for example migrant and informal economies and new forms of communal living) stand in contrast to one another.

Contemporary debates about various concepts of urbanity indicate a normatively grounded tension, into which enter interests as contradictory as "attractiveness of location", the assurance of "security", and notions of a "good life" in the city. This poses a challenge not only to policy-makers and urban planners but also to the creative sector, including artists, writers, and theorists. The uncoupling of economic growth and labour market development, the reinstatement of market mechanisms as the central system of allocation of accommodation, and new requirements regarding mobility and information systems, all raise the question about the agents — from politicians and urban planners to NGOs, citizens' groups, and artists — that influence or could influence the way the city develops.

From the western European city through the Second World city to megacities in Asia and Africa, the articles gathered under this focal point represent a broad geographical spectrum. However all demonstrate how one principle more than any other asserts itself in the contemporary urban social space. That principle — privatization — is geared towards the concentration of wealth and assets on an increasingly global scale. It is the attempt to naturalize this principle that these articles resist.

Complicit utopias: US Cold War planning

Architecture is often referred to as the most compromised of the arts. The two opening articles discuss architects who, though visionary and utopian, were also complicit with US Cold War policy: Constantin Doxiadis, with his "Ekistiks", the science of human settlements; and Victor Gruen, with his civic mission for the US suburbs.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Doxiadis built "New Towns" throughout the Middle East and Africa. Michelle Provoost [describes](#) how, while hoping to inculcate democratic values, New Towns failed to take into account indigenous traditions. Today, Doxiadis's urban neighbourhoods have become something quite different to what he anticipated: Sadr City, Baghdad's giant slum, for example, where typhoid and hepatitis epidemics rage and which is now the backdrop for a new type of urban warfare.

In the course of his life, Victor Gruen completed major urban interventions in the US and western Europe that fundamentally altered the course of western Urban development. Anette Baldauf [describes](#) how Gruen's fame rests mostly on the insertion of commercial machines into the decentred US suburbs. These so-called "shopping towns" were supposed to strengthen civic life and structure the amorphous, mono-functional agglomerations of suburban sprawl. Within a decade, Gruen's designs had become the architectural extension of the policies of racial and gender segregation underlying the US postwar consumer utopia.

Space and class: Regenerating the Western city

The rioting in the French *banlieu* in November 2005 has become synonymous with urban tensions in the western European city. A wake-up call to those with an implicit faith in French republicanism's egalitarian promise, the unrest represented the culmination of longstanding institutional racism in the country. With his reference to suburban French youth as "scum", Nicolas Sarkozy did more than anyone else to stoke the flames of the 2005 riots; as president, he is unlikely to be more placatory. In a discussion published at the time, French urban geographers, sociologists, and political scientists involved with the journal *Esprit* [discuss](#) the causes and effects of the rioting and offer solutions to conditions responsible for it. Now that place struggle has replaced class struggle, they suggest, the riots can be understood as a new attempt to extract solidarity from the middle classes.

Marseille, thought to have avoided the rioting that hit France in 2005 precisely because its working-class population owned a stake in the city space, is succumbing to the false charm of gentrification. François Ruffin reports how affordable, formally public housing is being demolished and tenants evicted to make way for luxury accommodation and shops. The resulting residential segregation, he writes, is widening ethnic, educational, and professional divides and fragmenting democratic debate. Sickeningly, the process is aided and abetted by a self-interested cultural sector only too happy to make use of the new infrastructural opportunities.

When it comes to infrastructure, Britain has a chequered past (just think of the Millenium Dome, Wembley Stadium, the rail network — all beset with problems and hugely expensive). Nevertheless, nowhere else in Europe is a more ambitious programme of urban restructuring underway than in London's East End — part of preparations for the London Olympic Games in 2012. In

London, Olympic visions tie in nicely with existing policies of regeneration. Made palatable by catchphrases such as "mixed tenure" and "social diversity", regeneration is effectively a policy of interference with existing social structures. And as Mark Saunders [describes](#), in east London, the structures being replaced are precisely those that do not sit comfortably alongside the private interests behind London's Olympic bid.

In New Orleans, false charm gives way to barefaced exploitation. Benedict Seymour [describes](#) how post-Katrina, the US government has taken advantage of the displacement caused by the flooding to replace the indigenous working class population with cheaper Latino labour. As in all regeneration schemes, the process is not restricted to the privatization of land and infrastructure, but is accompanied by a "holistic" attack on the price of labour-power. The relocation and disempowerment of communities, Seymour argues, constitute an attack on and denial of their means of social reproduction.

Filling the gaps left by Katrina will be sites of unproductive consumption: casinos, jazz theme parks, and elite Truman Show-style pseudo-communities. This type of urban space is anticipated by Robert Misik in his analysis of the logic of the shopping mall and "city branding". The shopping mall, he writes, simulates the buzz of city centres and creates an atmosphere conducive to consumption. Everything is planned in advanced and controlled; appropriation or adaptation of the space by passers-by is both impossible and forbidden. This rebounds on city centres: prettified, scrubbed, and tidied, they increasingly adopt the mall aesthetic.

Second World cities: Ownership, expropriation, survival

In the Second World, whether it be post-communist Europe, China, or the near East, the experience of being caught between systems is strongest. In Second World cities, the ownership and expropriation of property, along with the fight for survival, are the decisive factors of urban life. Ivaylo Ditchchev [describes](#) how, for the residents of Sofia, the transition from a controlled to a free-market economy has brought with it precarity and loss of status. In Bulgaria, unlike in other communist societies, property ownership was widespread; disposed former communist citizens now stake their claim to their property as a last vestige of personal empowerment. Meanwhile, as elsewhere, private interests on a far larger scale are reshaping the city. Ditchchev's insights find a direct visual equivalent in the [work](#) of Luchezar Boyadjiev, whose photographic collages take the logic of the "neo-capitalist city" to its visual conclusion.

China is the nation most graphically in the throes of transition to market economy and Shanghai its most important "global city". While construction companies stand first in line to profit from its growth, poorer residents have little chance against the speculator's bulldozer, [writes](#) Phillippe Pataud Célérier. It is estimated that since the 1990s, 2.5 million (of a total population 10 million) of Shanghai's residents have had their property expropriated by the State. "No construction without demolition" — Mao's slogan during the Cultural Revolution echoes all too clearly in China's current building boom.

The priority for residents of Turkey's *gecekondu* districts (*gecekondu* meaning "house built overnight") is survival: faced with the ever-present threat of earthquake, that means running water, minimum standards of health and hygiene, and a roof over the head. Hannah Rutishauser [describes](#) how the *gecekondu* districts sprang up on the outskirts of Istanbul and other Turkish

cities in the 1950s, as migrant workers came looking for work. Built semi-legally on public land, settlers were subsequently granted ownership. Now, around half of *gecekondu* residents live in rented accommodation, giving rise to a new land mafia. This is an example of how supposedly progressive measures to award squatters title deeds result in clientelist hierarchies. All the while, *gecekondu* districts continue to aggregate on the edges of Turkey's cities.

Megacities: Globalization's perfect storm

In the Third World, the urban space takes on new dimensions altogether — as do the accompanying problems. In his much discussed book *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis points out that while the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century population explosions in Europe created large-scale slums, Third World population growth today is unprecedented: "London in 1910 was seven times larger than it had been in 1800, but Dhaka, Kinshasa, and Lagos today are approximately *forty* times larger than they were in 1950. China [...] added more city-dwellers in the 1980s than did all of Europe (including Russia) in the entire nineteenth century!"¹ Insofar, then, as a combination of factors — political, infrastructural, environmental — opens the doors for the unchecked proliferation of private interests, the Third World megacity might well be called "globalization's perfect storm".

In Mumbai (Bombay), with its 19 million inhabitants, the enormous wealth disparities take on grotesque manifestations. In India's biggest city, slums are cleared to make way — quite literally — for golf courses. Ilija Trojanow [describes](#) how, among the bureaucratic classes, the word "slum" has become a synonym for "encroachment". The efforts of the wealthy to keep the poor at bay reminds Trojanow of the *laager* mentality of the European settlers in South Africa. There, life within the barricaded settlements was seen as orderly and harmonious, everything outside as filthy and chaotic. That mentality led directly to the Apartheid regime: a comparison not at all far-fetched in the context of contemporary Mumbai.

Writing from the inside, Swapan Chakravorty [provides](#) an account of his native Kolkata (Calcutta — population 15 million) in terms of its political failures past and present. He describes how the British failed to make good on their promise to modernize the city. This meant that to justify its status, Kolkata was forced to fall back on its cultural heritage. During the economic crises of the 1960s and 1970s, the Communist government rose to power through the support of the city's poor; today, still governing, it courts Western investors at the expense of those very same people. By sanitizing public spaces, and by evicting street vendors and stallholders, the government is threatening Kolkata's cultural heritage and vital tradition of urban commons.

Completing the section, without by any means exhausting the subject, we move to Kinshasa. The capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the second largest city in Sub-Saharan Africa (population 9 million) epitomizes the current urban chaos, [writes](#) Filip De Boeck. When its infrastructure is either non-existent or doomed to disappear, how can one get to grips with what holds the city together? The only way to understand the urban phenomenon of Kinshasa is through its relation to the body, sexuality, religion, money, madness, and death.

Strategies

How are these dilemmas to be solved, the inequalities redressed, the processes reversed? And how to do so while avoiding the pitfalls of the classical language of class struggle? Two contributions seek to offer perspectives; a third seeks to discredit a solution that has gained wide currency.

Beginning with the latter: Hernando De Soto's claim that the poverty of the slums could be elevated if "dead capital", in other words squatter's land, were given to those who lived on it. This solution, apparently so brilliant in its simplicity, numbers Bill Clinton, Kofi Annan, Egypt's Hosni Mubarek, and Brazil's Luiz da Silva among its admirers. In reality, however, de Soto's formalization of the economy aims to protect rights of ownership and ease the way for free market transactions, [argues](#) Staffan Granér. By maintaining that poverty can be solved by giving the poor formal rights of ownership, de Soto pulls a mystifying veil over what are in fact real social discrepancies.

And possible perspectives: Henrik Lebuhn [reports](#) on the community garden campaign in South Central L.A., an agricultural project run by local Latinos that has so far proved encouragingly resilient to the intentions of developers. An initiative that reflects Olivier Mongin's [thesis](#) that where global technical flows devour conventional urban space, globalization must be tackled "bottom up". Mongin examines how the experiments of Italian architects Alberto Magnaghi and Bernardo Secchi anticipated this need.

¹ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, London, New York: Verso 2006, 2.