Workshop Report

"Public City, Private City"

**Institute for Public Knowledge, New York University, New York City
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**Co-Conveners:
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Anupama Rao (Associate Professor of History, Barnard College/Columbia
University)**

Workshop context: expanding knowledge of the "urban"

The "Public City, Private City" workshop in New York was the first of three events to be organized in the context of the urban component (Forum 4) of the IIAS program on "Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context", funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The justification of this urban component is that cities constitute distinct domains that are as important to study as conventional geographical areas. Cities, no matter where they are located in the world, share fundamental geographic, economic, social and ecological characteristics and often have more in common with one another than with the hinterlands of the nation or regions to which they belong. At the same time, cities are also very much shaped by distinct local (national, regional) history, politics and processes. As Saskia Sassen claims: if we study the global then we also have to understand the regional dimension. The interplay of these factors shapes urban transformations.

The objective of Forum 4 is to rethink current knowledge of cities and conventional urban studies approaches, which are often dominated by the usual disciplinary silos (politics, economics, society, environment, etc.), and to identify new paradigms in the study of urban areas. This will be done through exploration of two substantive urban themes: the transformation of urban planning (workshop 1) and challenges the poor face in claiming their right to the city (workshop 2). A third workshop will focus on the future of urban studies more broadly, using participants' observations from the first two workshops as starting points.

Objectives of Workshop 1 (New York)

The overarching theme of the New York workshop was the role of planning in the production of the urban environment. Traditionally a public task, justified on the assumption that government is better able to protect the public interest, urban planning is increasingly being devolved to private parties, particularly in many South and Southeast Asian cities. In this context, the workshop considered the impact of these new planning forms, many of which are accompanied by high degrees of speculation and the privatisation of public space.

Discussions centred on the politics of planning (from the physicality of plans to their modes of visualization and on the way in which historical legacies of planning, spatial segregation, and informality challenge contemporary arguments about urban convergence. The focus was on contemporary Asian cities, but insights on comparative urbanism from other parts of the world – especially the United States, as the host nation of the workshop – featured prominently in the analyses.

Structure of the Workshop

The Workshop had the format of four open roundtable discussions around themes related to the topic of "public city, private city". The co-conveners, Paul Rabé and Anupama Rao, moderated the sessions.

The program consisted of four roundtable sessions, each of which was guided by sub-questions meant to jump-start and, at the same time, focus the discussions. The sessions and guiding questions were as follows:

Session 1: The rise of the "generic" city? The long-term consequences of modern city making in Asia and beyond

Guiding questions:

1) Are urban areas in Asia and beyond increasingly resembling "neoliberal cities", with the private sector determining urban form and function?
2) What financial and juridical arrangements are enabling these transformations?
3) What are the social, political, economic and ecological implications of the current mode of urban development?

Session 2: The past and future of planning

Guiding questions:

1) What are the histories of "planning" in Asian contexts? How have they been influenced by Euro-American practices and planning histories?

2) What modes of visualizing urban space and social experience are embedded in practices of planning and policy-making?
3) Who are the new urban planners, and how are they performing? What relationship between planning and "public interest" is emerging?
4) How will technology affect the urban future?

Session 3: Alternative modes of city making

Guiding questions:

1) Are there (better) alternatives to the neoliberal city, the generic city, and the private city?
2) What are the prospects for a "citizens' city", with citizens in the role of urban planners?
3) Does greater citizen involvement lead to better cities?
4) How are subaltern communities negotiating urban precarity?

Session 4: What role for urban knowledge?

Guiding questions:

1) How to develop a "deeper" urban knowledge and a non-Eurocentric "city theory" that addresses the discrepant histories of urbanity in the global South?
2) How can we understand the histories of capital, speculation, and real estate that are embedded in longue durée urban processes?
3) What is the place of comparison and inter-disciplinarity in this endeavor?

Prior to the workshop, participants were asked to prepare short "concept notes" that addressed one or more of the guiding questions. The co-conveners encouraged participants to share in all discussions. Participants were free to share their concept notes and their insights in their session of choice. However, they were encouraged to cluster around each of the session headers given their particular interest and expertise.

Participants and Outcome

Workshop participants comprised a mix of architects, planners, academics in the humanities and social sciences, lawyers, artists and PhD students.

They included (besides the two conveners):

• Titia van der Maas, Coordinator of the "Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context" program at IIAS;
• Michael Sorkin, Architect and Professor of Architecture at the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture, City College of New York;

- Bob Beauregard, Professor of Urban Planning at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, New York;
- Helena Kolenda, Program Director for Asia at the Henry Luce Foundation, New York;
- Xiangming Chen, Director of the Center for Urban Studies at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut;
- Janice Reiff, Professor of History at UCLA;
- Neema Kudva, Associate Professor of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University;
- Victoria Beard, Associate Professor of City and Regional Panning at Cornell University;
- Pramod Kumar, Director, Institute for Development and Communication (IDC), Chandigarh, India;
- Rahul Srivastava, Founding partner of URBZ and Urbanology, Mumbai, India;
- Liling Huang, Director of the Graduate Institute of Urban Planning and Building, National Taiwan University, Taipei;
- Richard Brooks, Charles Keller Beekman Professor of Law at Columbia Law School, New York;
- Jonathan Bach, Associate Professor of International Affairs at The New School in New York;
- Arvind Rajagopal, Professor of Media Studies at New York University;
- Manuel Shvartzberg, PhD candidate in the Architecture program at Columbia University;
- Nisha Mistry, Director of the Urban Law Center at Fordham University Law School in New York City;
- Vyjayanthi Rao, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, at The New School in New York;
- Laura Diamond Dixit, PhD candidate in Architecture at Columbia University;
- Diana Martinez, PhD candidate in Architecture History and Theory at Columbia University and Adjunct Professor at Barnard College;
- Eva Franch-Gilabert, Executive Director and Chief Curator of Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York;
- Mariam Ghani, artist, filmmaker, writer and teacher based in Brooklyn, New York;
- Emily Sun, Associate Professor in Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan.

The Workshop featured two prominent special guests: **Ritchie Torres**, member of the New York City Council representing the Central Bronx; and **Arjun Appadurai**, the Paulette Goddard Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development of New York University.

Discussions and Outcome

The following note does not aim to "summarize" the sessions as much as it attempts to pick out major themes and key interventions that focused on urban knowledge, across all four sessions.

Session 1: The generic city

The first session explored ways in which to look at – and understand – the new cities emerging in Asia and other parts of the world. One of the most striking phenomena in contemporary urban development is the emergence of large-scale private capital and top-down (public and private-led) planning. This is expressed physically in the rise of private spaces and neighborhoods (from shopping malls to gated communities) and the displacement of low-income populations and gentrification from/in city centers, giving rise to new "generic cities" (famously celebrated by star architect Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau in 1995, in their volume *S, M, L, XL*). Generic cities have shared characteristics no matter where they arise in the world, among them: an emphasis on infrastructure and security, a preference for large urban developments, mono land uses, uniform building typologies, urban sprawl, a deliberate disregard for underlying local ecology, social realities and cultural heritage (a preference for "cities without history"), a neo-Corbusian disdain for disorder and, and increased social exclusion.

On the one hand, workshop participants agreed that there *is* in fact such a thing as the emergence of a "generic" city that is affecting the individuality (and history) of cities. The generic city model takes on different forms, but all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, are dominated by commerce and the rise of multi-national corporations (MNCs). The logic of commerce dictates such aspects as lighting, acoustics, circulation – all in the name of commerce. The new generic city is highly modulated and does not need (or provide) public space. The "generic" term goes back to capitalism: capitalism needs to be hegemonic in order to thrive. On the ground in Asia this is reflected in new urban forms that are exported all over the region. For example, within Asia, Korea is exporting its planning model to Cambodia and Vietnam (with the new master plan of Hanoi, implemented by US companies and Korean chaebols). These trends are indeed leading to generic cities.

On the other hand, many participants thought that the "generic" label for cities, in itself, was insufficient. While the generic aspect of cities is not a myth, it is also an incomplete description. There are generic and branded spaces all over the world. Furthermore, not only generic cities have traits in common: all cities do! The generic city label also obscures: there are other, deeper developments occurring, such as the growing income divide (which is in fact the main theme in Workshop 2 of Forum 4, to be held in Mumbai, India in December 2014). Some thought that a more provocative term is needed – as well as more provocative

responses, including appropriation, for example. A second critique of this way of approaching cities is that one's perspective on generic cities depends on one's class and perspective. This makes that arguments about generic cities tend to become ideological arguments, separate from fact (for example, the over-used term "neo-liberal city" may obscure more than it clarifies). There is a need to theorize also from the global south. What are Asian and African perspectives on generic cities, for example, across different social and economic classes? More research is needed. Finally, a third set of critiques related to methodology. The "generic" term is uneven: it is descriptive rather than rigorous. There is a need to unpack the different components of the generic city.

Session 2: Planning and the State

In his concept note and verbal comments, Bob Beauregard (GSAPP, Columbia University) made a powerful argument against any approach to "the city" that maintains roots in the traditional academic disciplines, even in the form of inter-disciplinarity or trans-disciplinarity. Instead, inspired by Bruno Latour (1993), who critiqued the modernist assumption that there is a dichotomy between the social and natural sciences and culture and nature, Beauregard argues for an understanding of the city that is based on "following the actors". The city is a "product of collaboration, negotiation and accommodation between all actors, who include humans (in various arrangements), representatives of nature (kudzu, storm surges, rats), technologies (both infrastructural and regulatory), and built forms".

Beauregard's insights, which are partly based on Robert Alun Jones (1986) and Latour (2005), caution against the use of "social facts" – including neo-liberalism, globalization, financialization and also planning – as explanatory concepts. "Such concepts ignore their own creation. What is important is how planning, for example, is formed and practiced. Planning is not simply there. Planning, neo-liberalism, and globalization only have effects when actors respond to them, actors who, by responding, give them their material presence. Our focus has to be on how actors do things and make things happen, always doing so in association with others".

Echoing these insights implicitly, other participants provided their perspectives on how planning occurs. In most parts of the world, planners are simply muddling through. In India, for example, there never has been a state plan. This was an ideal imposed by North America and Europe. Instead, most cities are "surviving" rather than planning. Even in China, research in the post-communist context shows that researchers attribute too much power to the state. In Shanghai, for example, there are nine new towns, but many of them are without schools and hospitals, and they are in fact ghost towns. It is also dangerous to talk of "the" state: in most jurisdictions of the world there are multiple layers of the state (central, local, etc.), often with different interests and working at cross-purposes. Researchers and experts need to look at the unintended consequences of planning, not just the intended outcomes.

Session 3: Alternate modes of city making

Politicians, the business elite and planners of contemporary Asian cities share a common fantasy of mega-cities, but a new reality is that there are also declining or shrinking cities in Asia. Now, the emergence of civil society is something that is tying Asian cities together.

Many researchers and academics have a somewhat romantic notion of bottom-up planning. People doing their own planning can be very empowering in the short term and in some local settings – but only if there is trust. But it is very difficult to accomplish successfully in the long term, and difficult for people to make an impact at scale.

Liling Huang (National Taiwan University) pointed out that since the late 1980s successive new democratic governments in Taiwan have allowed citizens to engage in "radical activism". This has direct links to production of knowledge. The knowledge of citizen planners has helped actors to better understand people's own lives and city making. Knowledge forms should be dynamic: there is a role for social media in city making and ways of sharing knowledge. Participation used to mean that residents draw maps and share these with government officials. But recently other forms of engagement have emerged (including in the arts, theater, and documentaries). But there are still other marginalized groups. Recently, residents are resisting big new government redevelopment plans. They are winning cases in constitutional court, and they are forcing shifts in government policy. Government policies are evolving from private developer initiation to residents' initiation. Nevertheless, some residents are still loath to initiate this.

Session 4: Urban knowledge

The final session provided an opportunity for all participants to raise questions and make suggestions about the forms of knowledge needed in future about urban areas in Asia and beyond. These are summarized in bullet form below:

- Four claims: 1) Knowledge is plural; 2) Information or facts are not knowledge (Latour); 3) Knowledge is always situated or embodied; and 4) Collective action requires the co-constitution of knowledge.

- Friedrich Hayek's use of knowledge in society is an example of the multiplicity of actors. All knowledge in society is dispersed. It can never be subsumed and be collected (only) by the state or the market.

- Knowledge for whom or for what? Be cautious of experts who claim to be neutral. Facts do not speak of their own: they are molded by experts and other users.

- Are Asian cities specific or not? Does the "Asian cities" label still make sense? There was not necessarily an alignment of views on these questions. There are common values and common contexts across Asia. But we need to look at methodology and not over-interpret.

Top left: New York City Councilmember Ritchie Torres. Top right: Professor Arjun Appadurai. Bottom: Roundtable discussion at the "Public City, Private City" workshop, New York, 27 August 2014. Photographs: Paul Rabé.