

The city (re)shaped: exploring the nexus between politics, memory and urbanism in the built environment

Introduction

The multidisciplinary conference “The City (Re)shaped: Exploring the Nexus Between Politics, Memory and Urbanism in the Built Environment”, organised by the Architecture and Urbanism Research Group was held at the University of Leeds, UK on 11–12 September 2018. Confronted with the increasing number of research projects and publications on Cities transformation in the global south, the conference aimed to enhance dialogue between academics and non-academic policy practitioners and community members. Both days of the conference included keynote speakers, workshops and roundtable discussions to debate and explore new insights on the history and future of cities through theoretical encounters and comparative analytical cases within the MENA, Europe and the rest of the world. The aim was to further the understanding of the intertwined dynamic nature of the Politics of Urbanism and the Urbanism of Politics as manifested in many cities around the world. Conversely, it questioned how cities and everyday urban life are used – and abused – in the containment of these broader national conflicts, in addition to exploring their potential for achieving the self-sustaining moderation, constructive channelling or resolution. We were particularly interested in scholarly contributions that speak to these themes through a range of topics across various spheres and powers relations.

The conference was organised in 15 panels with two keynote speakers and a workshop (the programme can be downloaded from the conference website at (<https://conferences.leeds.ac.uk/cityreshaped/>)). The 65 papers – across nine different themes – were authored by academic early career researchers and postgraduate students interested in the history of global and political connections, urban planning and housing approaches and practice, social movements, spaces, actors, networks, ideas and intersections between the local and the global from antiquity to the present day. A welcome note launched the opening session by University of Leeds academics; Professor Peter Jimack (Dean of the Faculty of Engineering), Professor Gary Dymksi (Director, Cities theme) and Dr Gehan Selim (Conference Chair). The first Keynote speaker, Professor Carsten Vellguth (Germany) offered a presentation on Lessons in Urban politics: East-West perspectives. Professor Ashraf Salama delivered a talk on frameworks for understanding cities shaping and reshaping processes. Besides, Professor Yehya Serag (Egypt) led a workshop on comparative analysis of Urbanism in MENA and European Cities. It is not that often that researchers working in the field of Architecture and Urbanism, with interest in different global south regions, from such different academic backgrounds and geographic origins, come together to discuss new challenges facing our cities nowadays. This context allowed the exploration, during both days of the conference, to be open for new critical discussions of key challenges confronting cities following from major political events that implicated its (re)shaping.

Hence, this special issue is one of the conference outcomes, which includes the publication of 15 selected papers which we anticipate that could lead to the development of new forms of collaborative work in this field. And indeed, the development of a multidisciplinary network of research groups and individuals and other forms of academic exchange are also being considered, as well as a second conference to be organised during 2020.



(Re)connecting with cities

In recent years, cities have assumed growing prominence in discussions over economic growth, performance, and prosperity across the world. Politicians and policymakers in national governments and international bodies have likewise recognised the key role that cities play, and have directed attention to cities as the foci of policy intervention and governance reform. Cities have come to dominate how we think and talk about our changing lives. Cities of the Global South are normally pinned under the slogan of underdevelopment (Parnell and Robinson, 2012). Scholars have framed these cities as the “planet of slums”, with its “surplus humanity” and “twilight struggles” to survive (Davis, 2004). Despite their evident high rates of capital accumulation and democratic governance, they are also overtaken by their destiny of poverty, violence, and divide between First World cities, that are considered as desired models, and Third World cities that are seen as problematic places that require analysis and restructuring. However, there is little doubt that cities are navigating a turbulent and uncertain context, and face an intense set of economic, social and environmental challenges. There is mounting evidence that different cities are demonstrating very different capacities to adapt, cope with and respond to such challenges leading to diverse and unpredictable outcomes. Some cities have proliferated, while others have lagged behind. Other cities have managed to “(re)Shape” themselves, and undergo a social and economic resurgence, while others have declined.

The city is often conceptualised as flows of a global economy that signs a new phase of provincial capitalist development and is, therefore, the key space of growth, contest, and governance (Scott, 2001). This conceptualisation falls short in several ways. First is that scholarship on cities is behind on the way new territorial forms are politically constructed and reproduced through everyday life and struggles around consumption and social reproduction’ (Jonas and Ward, 2007). Therefore, there is a need for less competitiveness and for closer attention to the practices and politics of “care” that make possible the economical production of cities (Till, 2012). Second is that scholarship on cities is thin in its engagement with matters of equality and democracy (Purcell, 2007). The focus on economic competitiveness tends to omit the territory of political struggle through which the people’s social space as “lived” and “practised” vanishes overtime (Lefebvre, 1991).

In addition, the global and local implications of many contemporary struggles, as in the Middle East and Europe, and the persistence of poverty and insecurity across many conflicts affected underdeveloped countries (Selim, 2016). We observed a significant change in the political landscape in different parts of the world. In 2011, the world witnessed events of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, the Ukrainian Revolution and the Iranian protests in 2017, which had its imprints on the built environment. Moreover, the protracted refugee crisis and the constant movement of migrants continue to dominate the international security agenda and are directly challenging global institutions as well as the modern state, and social affection towards those in need. The on-going political and ethno-religious conflict has developed unpredictable spatial and physical interventions, such as the Berlin Wall and segregated communities in Northern Ireland (Abdelmonem and Selim, 2019).

(Re)shaping cities in the Global South

The present articles collectively argue that it is time to rethink the geographies of urban and regional theory. Much of the theoretical work is steadily located in the urban experience of few cities and as part of a recognised tradition where theory is produced in the sphere of American and European contexts (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). However, the urban future lays elsewhere: in the cities of the global south, in cities such as Egypt, Barcelona, Naples, Jordan and more. Hence, the question is, can the experiences of these cities reshape the theoretical focus of urban and metropolitan analysis? The articles also cover the different experiences and consequences of, and challenges for, cities undergoing transformation.

There is a broad interest in researching human aspects of architecture, spatial practices, urban heritage, material culture and the built environment within the ever-changing urban and social structures of contemporary cities forcing new territories of interaction, innovation, creativity and analysis (Salama, 2019; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2019; Furlan *et al.*, 2019).

The depth and breadth of the discussions within the papers of this issue have adopted comprehensive methodologies that took account of the influence and impact of human actors, either as individuals, groups, or communities. The architecture and urban scale are essential domains through which the intellectual debate, negotiation and dialogue between the broad spectrum of theoretical, social, cultural, political, practical and technological concerns would help us to inform a better future of more sustainable and humane cities and built environments. The articles also reveal uncommon stories of informality, conflict, social movements and practising political power, which interrogates novel and creative “territorial” readings of cities whereas the locale is perceived as a “field of agonistic engagement” with “different scales of politics & social action” (Amin, 2004). These narratives are unusual because they have been less examined and investigated in the regulated narrative of cities in the global south. This work draws on a fundamental interest in the understanding of the mutually dependent relationship between culture, society and technology.

The first theme introduced in this special issue is on Practising Political Power in Public spaces. This theme is articulated through three distinctive contributions. Through two empirical case studies in Tehran and Turkey, Zamani and Mehan (2019) examined and contextualised Lefebvre’s concept of the “abstract space” and its relation to the alienation of political public space in those two cities. They explain how the abstract space of the State, both universally, and within the Middle Eastern context, tends to eliminate any anomaly that threatens its power, which is not limited to the physical spatiality of these contested places, but it also recasts the memory of spatial resistance. Using first-hand methods (archival and media research, online resources, nonparticipatory observation and photography) Javanmardi (2019) investigates how urbanism under Dictatorship has led to imposed spatial segregation in Tehran. She analyses urbanism products, development plans, and the process of modernisation as outcomes of local urban policies that shaped the transformation of the capital city in Iran during the second Pahlavi (1941–1979). Chiappini *et al.* (2019) examines the interaction between central and marginal users, and the efforts by local authorities to observe illegal migrants and to keep them under control in the core of Glòries, Barcelona.

Migration, Spatial Justice and the Everyday Urban Realm is the second theme covered in this issue. Fernández Marín (2019) examines cross-border cooperation structures and urban change in the Trinational Agglomeration of Basel. The paper provides a theoretical exploration of the evolution and extent of cross-border cooperation structures and practices affecting Weil am Rhein (Germany), Basel (Switzerland), and Saint-Louis and Huningue (France). Abudib and Remali (2019) provides a framework that contextualises and identifies key factors that impact the formation and transformation of three medinas in the region of North Africa; Tripoli, Tunis and Fez during three significant phases: colonisation, modernisation and globalisation. Similarly, Harrington *et al.* (2019) looks at the Sarajevo’s post-war recovery which radically changed the approaches to the built environment, opening the potential for exploitation by different players in the current power-structure, within the laissez-faire climate. Al-Thahab and Abdelmonem (2019) examine how inherited values, traditions and rituals stand behind the organic tissue of traditional quarters in Iraq, thus providing a sufficient criterion to be considered when discussing sustainable development or creating a responsive environment in societies of exceptional privacy. As part of the response plan to the refugee crisis in Jordan, Shalan (2019) used face to face interviews with to draw on Syrian refugees’ women accounts on employment opportunities which were created through several programs. Regardless of gender, the employment

process was “transformational” in terms of young refugees’ progress towards self-reliance, whereas its impact was less significant on older refugee women with child-rearing responsibilities. Also, Hegazy and Hegazy (2019) discusses how female Syrian refugees who settled in Egypt are preserved as mere followers to men who socially and economically dominate the families in the Middle East. Hegazi and Fouda (2019) employ Space Syntax as an urban analysis tool to develop strategies of re-imaging the Rosetta historic district in Egypt. They argue that the unplanned reuse of heritage districts has affected the historic image of Rosetta, due to the new buildings established within the historic core of the city and its connected spaces; the system that connected the Rosetta core with those spaces was lost and has become disintegrated.

The third theme is formed by the exploration of Art, Place and Peace Building in the city as part of broader practice-led research projects that look into models of public collaborative thinking within the context of artistic practice. Scholars argue that the public realm has been co-opted by neo-liberal political and economic forces, resulting in a sense of hopelessness that limits our ability to imagine anything else. In addition, neoliberal policies promote commercial interests which subsequently drives inequality and determines what can and cannot be accessed by the public (Selim, 2015; Selim *et al.*, 2017). Hence, what we currently have in our neoliberal cities are in fact “pseudo” public spaces governed by neoliberal practices of public institutions whose policies regulate and control “public” space Hoskyns (2014). Mancke’s (2019) “Experiments in Interfaces” reflects on artistic tactics that counter this sense of hopelessness, arguing that practices often suggest alternative social structures, foster ephemeral (local) public spheres or propose spatial configurations that support these. Sanliturk (2019) investigates the implications of the UN visions for Pyla in Cyprus as a prototype of integrity and bi-communality. He critically employs Michel Foucault’s concepts of power to set up indirect ways of manipulation in everyday life of individuals in order to challenge “peace-keeping” strategies.

On the other hand, contemporary wars are continuously striking population centres across the globe with devastating consequences of destruction and annihilation and leading to a large number of casualties within civilians. Indeed, a growing body of interdisciplinary research tackling civilians’ living conditions during urban combat has focused on the use of architectural artefacts in oppressing and controlling the everyday of the urban population. Another line of research also examined how political violence exerted by the state and non-state forces showed evidence of discipline and control against its inhabitant’s “rights to the city” (Harvey, 2003). Kittana’s and De Meulder (2019) paper pursues to add one more dimension to this body of literature by focusing primarily on the agency of architecture in the civilians’ resilience/resistance practices. Taking the invasion of Nablus city in Palestine by Israeli Army in 2002 as a study case, his paper provides a closer understanding as to how the practice of resistance and resilience which become an urban process that implies a reinterpretation of the urban spaces.

In describing spaces as shapable, informed by the embodied dialectic relations between spaces and social relations, Yaghi *et al.* (2019) uses forms of performative methodology to create productive disruptions and “constructed situations” (Debord, 2012). The authors ask how forms of “performative” interventions can prompt processes of re-thinking which can, in turn, instigate the critical production of public space. Their approach is rooted in feminist theories of performativity, which focus on how identities are persistently re-produced through performance. These theories consider how the “self” is always entangled within everyday life interactions and how both societal and bodily practices shape it. di Campi (2019) looks at how various forms of residential tourism or lifestyle migration, produced by people arriving from the cities and territories of the so-called Global North, have triggered complex processes of social-spatial modification in the landscapes and rural environments of Vilcabamba, Ecuador.

The Special Issue includes a range of 15 blind-reviewed articles that seek to create an agenda for the study of the twenty-first Century metropolis that is focused on a variety of dynamic topologies and deep relationalities: the globalisation of cities, the production and politics of space, and its broader territoriality. The aim is not to map bounded locales but rather an analysis of the range and multiplicity of metropolitan modernities. As such, they offer insights towards advanced understandings of the ever-changing landscape of contemporary cities. While the majority of the contributions react to the growing domains of enquiry, research, and application in Architecture and Urbanism research, issues relevant to authenticity, identity and resilience remain challenging components for future discourse on Cities.

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