

BESPRECHUNGSAUFSATZ

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

THE CITY IN FRAGMENTS. HOW ECONOMIC DYNAMICS TRANSFORM URBAN SPACE

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BOOK REVIEWS

BARNS, Sarah (2020): Platform Urbanism. Negotiating Platform Ecosystems in Connected Cities. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 232 pages, ISBN: 978-981-32-9274-1.

JUDD, Dennis R., MCKENZIE, Evan, ALEXANDER, Alba (eds.) (2021): Private Metropolis. The Eclipse of Local Democratic Governance. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 302 pages, ISBN: 978-1-5179-1082-2.

PHELPS, Nicholas A. (2021) The Urban Planning Imagination. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 248 pages, ISBN: 978-1-5095-2625-3.

SALERNO, Giacomo-Maria (2020): Per una critica dell'economia turistica. Venezia tra museificazione e mercificazione. Macerata: Quodlibet, 251 pages, ISBN: 978-88-229-0469-0.

SHAPIRO, Aaron (2020): Design, Control, Predict. Logistical Governance in the Smart City. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 283 pages, ISBN: 978-1-5179-0827-0.

The political and social transformations of neoliberal globalisation have completely changed the face of the city/metropolis and urban spaces. The violence of the financial and debt cycle has not spared cities, either structurally or in terms of social interactions. Taking a cue from the important studies of SASSEN and BRENNER, it can be stated that the processes of globalisation and the contemporary cycles of capitalist accumulation have produced a hierarchy of metropolises, which overlaps with the existing political and economic divisions. Multiscalar analysis, in fact, allows us to analyse the close connection between the different dynamics that contribute to form the governance of urban space: the global, the local, the technological and the social. The set of these dynamics defines

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today's status of the city: processes of privatisation, cycles of technological innovation, tourist economy are compasses that guide the debate and orient policies, especially critical ones. The books discussed in this paper deal with these issues, analysing them both from a theoretical point of view and hypothesising social and political alternatives to the current state of governance and urban economy.

The first book is *“Private Metropolis. The Eclipse of Local Democratic Governance”*, edited by Dennis R. JUDD, Evan MCKENZIE and Alba ALEXANDER. The title itself is indicative of the set of themes that the studies in the book address, dealing especially with urban mutations in the United States and Great Britain. The crisis of local governance, precisely, is a consequence of the different composition of public and private interests that are inscribed in the urban space. Public governance has certainly lost its deliberative centrality and the power of direct intervention in the definition of standard urban policy issues, and has been joined by other agencies, expressions of global powers and private economic interests. One of the main causes of the new articulation of powers is the weight that the public debt has assumed in the concrete implementation of redevelopment and transformation plans. As a result, the action of municipalities has diminished and they have had to resort increasingly to private financing. As a result, privatisation and special economic areas have been the privileged tools that have allowed economic operators and special government agencies to insert themselves into city government, and to ultimately define its strategies, goals, and operational means. The stratification of power relations between the public and private sectors can be defined as follows:

“The intergovernmental triad (IT) approach to governance has three significant effects on local development. First, it directly brings the state (especially a state’s governor) into governing local decisions. Second, it formalizes the informal interactions of private sector and public sector (...) as a key element of the urban regimes via authorities’ boards of directors. Third, it (...) institutionalizes the interest of the regime on specific policies.” (SMITH in JUDD, MCKENZIE and ALEXANDER (eds.) 2021, p. 31)

In this sense, the financing of urban operations allows private operators to participate directly, by virtue of expertise, in the production of city policies, reconfiguring the structure of decision-making. Moreover, the operators themselves open these policies to other interests, through stakeholder-based arrangements, which subject city building capacity to the will of investors, partially removing it from public control. MCKENZIE, in his essay, underlines the central role that *“multiple functions special districts”* have progressively assumed in the implementation of urban planning operations, especially with regard to the construction of infrastructure and facilities for the residents of particular urban areas.

The scholar defines these agencies as “phantom governments”, i.e., political structures characterised by invisibility, independent decision-making, and the absence of democratic control of voters and residents (MCKENZIE in *ibid.*, pp. 61–62). The viscosity of these governmental assemblages, at the same time, highlights the minimal space to which public municipal governance has been relegated, incapable of long-term planning and able to intervene, partially, in the short and medium term. Consequently, the development of infrastructure and the resolution of problems are entrusted to the Public-Private Authorities, which intervene directly by virtue of the operational force and legitimacy conferred on them by their preponderant role in the economic sphere. This role is also facilitated by fiscal policies, which put mixed authorities in a position to act, due to the insolvency of local governments:

“1) The developer pays out of personal funds and secures borrowed money or which only the developers is obligated; 2) the municipality finances the infrastructures and assumes obligation for the borrowed money; or 3) the developed leverages land-secured financing in

which all property owners in the development become obligated to pay some portion of the borrowed money." (WAND and HENDRICK in *ibid.*, p. 191).

Very schematically, the quotation illustrates the financialisation of urban policies of public utility, with the constant chasing of budgetary constraints and the privatisation of public assets, the sale of entire areas to investors to meet the economic obligations contacted for investments. In this sense, privatisation processes are facilitated by state and municipal authorities, in order to increase the value of urban space and increase the mass of investment in all sectors, from the supply of water and energy to the restructuring of transport and public logistics (which are dealt with extensivity in the essays of the volume dedicated to the study of these dynamics in specific areas and cities).

Moreover, the concept of "public" is redefined by the authors (especially in PERRY and DONOGHUE's essay) as an element of the mixture between collective interests and private governance, as a conceptual device that transforms guaranteed access rights into privileges to be paid, into private goods that the state guarantees, finances and repays. Certainly, the book offers a timely and informed overall framework of analysis that can be safely extended to the current state of the city's global form. In addition, it should be emphasised how the mixture between public administration and private interests de-potentiate institutions and generate vast circuits of corruption, reinforcing the role of the State as a point of conjunction in multi-scalar dynamics. The latter is configured as an operator capable of intervening in urban economic operations and in the public production of urban policies themselves.

At this point, the role of infrastructure in the ecology of urban governance should be clear: it simultaneously absorbs the flow of capital, facilitates the management of issues, and reinforces the widespread diffusion of technical devices in urban space. *"Platform Urbanism. Negotiating Platform Ecosystems in Connected Cities"*, the book by Sarah BARNES, is a study on the relationship between urbanism and information technologies, on the role that these play within the metropolitan space, and on the productive and organisational power of the "platform". Indeed, in the wake of LEFEBVRE and HARVEY's urban critique, the author links metropolis and capital, analysing contemporary developments in capitalism and their impact on urban life. Logistics predisposes metropolitan space to extractive processes and value capture through movement, exploiting the capitalist nature of *"platform economies"*. The link between these two elements is defined as follows:

"Platform urbanism therefore speaks to a set of burgeoning ideas about how the increasing ubiquity of platform ecosystems is reshaping urban conditions, institutions and actors. The term is used to capture how the particular dynamics of platform ecosystem entangle private and public organisations as well citizens (...) is also increasingly understood as manifestation of digital or platform governance for cities." (BARNES 2020, p. 19)

In fact, these computer applications, playing on the horizontality of use and the immediacy of the services offered, make the experiences of communication, movement and consumption *"user-friendly"* and participatory, hiding the use of a mobile and flexible workforce. Behind the veneer of the "sharing economy" and "sharing urbanism", sold as participatory and networked urbanism, lies a project of cybernetic governance of the metropolis, which would limit citizenship to simple operations such as access or use of the platform itself. At the same time, the device-platform breaks down the metropolis and spaces, and reduces them to a set of different offerings: food, hospitality, relationships, transportation. The reality is that of a tendential *"uberization"* of urban space, which is made absolutely dependent on the mediation of the platform in real time, and with institutions unable to manage the flow of data, because they have little regulatory power over the platforms

themselves in terms of taxation and privacy management. In this sense, the platform is a mediating interface between subject and urban environment, organising urban governance and shaping it to capitalist command and citizen-user preferences.

What emerges is a new concept of flexible urbanism, which mediates and transforms spaces in real time from algorithms. This set of processes, consequently, highlights how urban space is a machine capable of assembling and recombining its dimensions through the socialisation of simultaneous consumption, offered by apps and media devices. As a logistic space, it is completely innervated by networks and devices capable of capturing data from every user and transforming them into objects of control and, paradoxically, of participation in decision-making processes. The technocapitalist production of urban space, in this sense, is mediated by the extraction and manipulation of individual data.

For BARNS, computer networks are the second skin of urban space, as their role is greatly enhanced by both the ubiquity of technologies and the ability to deploy government functions on different planes and in smart, engaging and accessible ways. The city is a mega-hub, which produces and connects the different micro-social transactions, and which groups and catalogues the possible experiences, and transforms them into algorithms of consumption and control. This new algorithmic governance, consequently, facilitates the planning of present and future dynamics, by calculating subjective effects on urban structure in a way that makes them predictable. The utopia of “*model cities*” thus finds its realisation, netted by social turbulence. According to the author, these dynamics implement the construction of the city from virtual models, so as to exceed and bypass the materially political dimension:

“The attempt to build cities ‘from the internet up’ comes at a time when the business tactics of platform intermediaries are increasingly considered to be extractive, resulting a stronger push for public ownership of city data (...). At the same time (...) the financialization of platform intermediaries also demonstrates the scale at which platform ecosystem seek to operate globally.” (BARNS 2020, p. 188)

The democratic deficit, presented above, returns in all its problematic nature, accelerated by the strength and speed of platforms, which represent a further step in the scalar fragmentation of problems. Connecting urbanism and cybernetics, BARNS highlighted both the living nature of the two systems, their dynamic functionality, and their being part of a capitalist project of producing other spaces for the circulation of goods and the increase of profits, with problematic repercussions regarding the global (and metropolitan) division of labour. Clearly, the fundamental problem is that of the material socialisation of the dynamics of sharing, of the concrete and effective participation of the inhabitants in the definition of the policies of urban transformation, also through the democratisation of the platforms and a redefinition of their use.

If BARNS’ book provides the analytical frame for the production of the urban through platforms, “*Design, Control, Predict. Logistical Governance in the Smart City*” by Aaron SHAPIRO analyses the material effects of urban technological transformations. The author interrogates, from a trans-disciplinary perspective, crossing ethnographic research, interviews and theoretical analysis, the meaning of the concept of “*smart*”, and its impact on everyday life. First, it can be safely said that SHAPIRO deconstructs the progressive rhetoric of cybernetic imaginaries, by highlighting the command function that logistical networks play in reinforcing securitarian projects. To control and predict, in this sense, are the two keywords that define the horizon of metropolitan policies. Both are based on logistics as an organisational structure that, from the world of work and the circulation of goods, can be dislocated on social space, with the addition of other key terms: optimisation, rationalisation and coordination.

Indeed, the book's three chapters articulate this project of rationalisation and restructuring of space and relationships by analysing the economic dynamics, the processes of financing technological operations, the impact of control technologies on the division of labour, and the enhancement of police control devices to anticipate crime. The scenario SHAPIRO shows is, at first glance, absolutely dystopian, worthy of P. DICK's fiction or cyberpunk imagery. The aesthetic change of the metropolis and the illusion of "*horizontal*" that devices and platforms make palatable, in fact, are the effects of what N. SMITH has called "*politics of social revanchism*", of those widespread processes of transformation of the city generated by the needs of the upper class and the "*creative class*", the social base of the digital revolution. If the goal of these policies is to make the city increasingly "accessible", it is achieved at the price of marginalising the less affluent and those deemed dangerous, and making permanent the joint venture between public authorities and investors. In this sense, the production of the new urban space is primarily ideological:

"City governments and private developers try to bolster their credibility by simulating authenticity. Inviting public participation in urban planning and design processes is one way of doing just that, whether in the form of citizen councils or design competitions. (...) Design competitions perform a certain humility among city agencies, with experts appearing to yield their authority to laid ideas." (SHAPIRO 2020, pp. 50–51)

The ideology of connectivity as participation in governance, and the processes of urban transformation characterise the city more as "*integrated supply chains*" a space to be administered through the reference models provided by logistics. In this case, the communication and the production of imagination are the object of the organisational model, because they are adaptable to the relational forms fed by social networks, and able to produce "*events*", or dynamics of instant valorisation based on viral marketing. Thus, logistics stops being mere organisational technology to become an element of wealth production. As a result, the "smart" organisation of work moves in a complex entanglement between platforms, derivatives, financials, and constantly changing urban topologies (ibid., p. 131).

SHAPIRO, in fact, evidences the extreme flexibility and precariousness of the workers of the "smart" sectors, forced to the continuous availability, or, in other terms, obliged to be always connected. As BARNS analysed, the platform acts as a mediator, not only economic, but also monitoring of the worker's performance and economic viability. Smart design, in this case, accentuates the pauperisation of labour-power, and ties it to the metropolitan supply-chain. In this respect, it is interesting the analysis that SHAPIRO makes of the new police control technologies, which move in the same horizon. The "*smart philosophy*", founded on the exaltation of immanence, manifests itself instead as a form of constant and invisible mediation:

"Mediation makes society imaginable to its members through distancing, optics, and objectification, and it is in this expansive, radical sense of mediation that I mean the patrol mediates: it produces 'crime' and safety' through its mediation of urban landscape." (SHAPIRO 2020, p. 165)

Social order is ensured through the preventive selection of subjects deemed dangerous, the artificial production of crimes to be subjectively charged. The transparency of the smart city is, concretely, the product of the social cleansing operation conducted by the police. At the same time, data collection and predictive production of deviance is portrayed as an operation of optimising urban space and improving relationships between subjects and technologies. Indeed, these operations show the ferocity of the urban supply-chain.

What the smart city is should be clear at this point. It is a project of spatial reinvention of relationships, produced by technologies, which results in a huge space of control of lives and activities through the mediation of the same devices of “facilitation” of the urban experience. Thus, SHAPIRO bluntly describes the urban project today as a project of surveillance and control based on the technocapitalist utopia, the ultimate symbiosis of public and private interest, and the dynamics of innovation as experiences of “creative destruction” of the capitalist cycle. This urban machine, at the highest level of development, is a machine of order, security and exclusion.

Another piece to compose the picture of urban transformations is provided by Giacomo-Maria SALERNO’s book *“Per una critica dell’economia turistica. Venezia tra museificazione e mercificazione”*, focused on the intertwining of the different forms of valorisation of urban space in the city of Venice. To be even more precise, the dynamics that SALERNO critically analyses, those present in the subtitle of the book itself, are themselves the product of urban capitalism, of which gentrification is only one face. The commodification of urban space is, to highlight the links with themes discussed so far, an effect of the parcellation out of the same space operated by economic flows. *Museification*, on the other hand, is an effect that involves the cultural dimension of the city, its historical and social nature. Both effects are linked to the *“leisure economy”*, that economic circuit based on the search for entertainment, which flanks and replaces the “cultural” offer of the city with the offer of goods and services linked to leisure.

SALERNO, moving between philosophy, sociology, urban criticism and political activism in social movements, brings this complex economic and ideological device into focus, firstly by highlighting the productive nature of the city. The city is in fact analysed as a space of encounter (SIMMEL), of production of commons (NEGRI), and at the same time as a point of inscription of the mechanisms of exploitation and dynamics of extractivism (MEZZADRA, NEILSON, GAGO). Consequently, the authentic urban experience is the contemporary frontier of profit generated by mass tourism, the fulfillment of the spectacularisation of the urban through technological devices:

“Elementi mediani tra l’immagine che ne innesca la voglia di partire e l’immagine riportata a casa alla fine del viaggio, i turisti sembrano indicare all’uomo moderno il suo nuovo ruolo di supporto biologico per la proliferazione di immagini (...) il mondo spettacolarizzato contribuisce dunque a fagocitare l’esperienza vissuta, che tende a ridursi ad un ciclo di produzione e consumo di immagini.” (SALERNO 2020, p. 60)¹⁾

The tourist experience is produced as an ideological object, which contributes to a type of pleasure of *nostalgia* and *authenticity* that also shapes cultural proposals, in this sense “alienating” and projected into a temporal hole, in which the remains of the past are offered to the tourist’s gaze. The hunger for experience and the economy of nostalgia reduce the city to an open-air museum, to a hyper-space where everything is history, but a history deprived of its social and material contents.

In a BENJAMINIAN sense, the loss of the city’s historical aura pairs with the *massification* of tourist attendance, which contributes to the inscription of capitalist flows produced by the “spatial turn” (ibid., p. 135). If, therefore, gentrification operates a spatial differentiation in the access to urban space, then *touristification* operates an economic differentiation in the consumption of the same space, so as to identify a target of tourists/consumers who are predominantly affluent. Moreover,

¹⁾ “Median elements between the image that triggers the desire to leave and the image brought back home at the end of the trip, tourists seem to indicate to modern man his new role as a biological support for the proliferation of images (...) the spectacular world thus contributes to engulfing lived experience, which tends to be reduced to a cycle of production and consumption of images.”

gentrification operations tend to coincide with the shift of cities to the tourist economy, which often and willingly constitutes the only source of city wealth production. In this sense, both dynamics describe the mass tourism economy as a monoculture.

The theoretical framework, illustrated in the first two parts of the book, is used by the author to describe the “Venice case”, the phenomenal form of the museum city in which history, ideology, nostalgia, entertainment are closely connected. The history of the lagoon city, in fact, is the history of the constant technological innovations to save it from the dangers of the sea (for example the rising of the waters), and it is the history of the cosmopolitan republic, which, since the modern age, has been the destination of artists, philosophers and men of letters, as well as the ideal scenario for numerous cultural products. But it is precisely this mythological aura that has transformed Venice into an object of consumption first, and into a tourist park today.

SALERNO brilliantly illustrates the historical genealogy of the processes of urbanisation and rationalisation of the city, which “exploded” on land because of structural issues and political choices, and “imploded” in its historical specificity because of these choices:

“ad essere distrutta è stata quella stratificazione di lavoro comune che è stata la città storica (...) per mezzo di questa silente ‘distruzione’ Venezia è stata così predisposta, attraverso una sorta di politica del vuoto, ad una grande ondata speculativa, giocata sulla cresta della montante monocultura turistica.” (SALERNO 2020, pp. 194–195)²⁾

The gradual emptying of the city, in fact, has allowed the acceleration of the processes of urban speculation related to accommodation facilities, in which platforms that offer rental services play a central role, and that transform every homeowner into a possible hotelier. The pandemic crisis, by partially blocking tourist travel, has highlighted the limits of the tourism monoculture. Consequently, for the author, the alternative is not to be sought in yet another return to pre-tourist authenticity, but in the practices of movements for the right to the city. The example used is that of the famous Pink Floyd concert in Venice in 1988, which marked the advent of the showcase city and, at the same time, saw the participation of an immense crowd of young people who took over the city (as in the celebrations of the Carnival, another pivotal event in Venetian culture).

SALERNO, clearly, writes that it is necessary to oppose the “*city-museum*” without history, claiming the “*city-commune*”. The latter is the city produced by the sedimentation of experiences in the course of history, the city that the inhabitants recognise and imagine as theirs. The right to the city is, consequently, also the right to the re-appropriation of their historical spaces, and the imagination of a new use of them, a use aimed at the realisation of the needs of the inhabitants.

The last part of this paper deals with urban imagination, to the rethinking of urbanism as a democratic and participatory practice. The book by Nicholas A. PHELPS in question is in fact entitled “*The Urban Planning Imagination*” and is conceived as a useful glossary of urban planning practices, a useful tool to study urban transformations and design a different future. This book summarises and summarises most of the dynamics illustrated so far, analysing them from the historical point of view, from the theoretical one and from the practical effects, on the discipline and on the urban space.

PHELPS, in the book’s eight chapters, problematises and dissects all the characteristics of urban design, defining the purposes, means, and objects of planning, observing developments in global

²⁾ “To be destroyed was that stratification of common work that was the historical city (...) through this silent ‘destruction’ Venice was thus predisposed, through a sort of politics of emptiness, to a great speculative wave, played on the crest of the rising tourist monoculture.”

urbanisation, and trying to draw from them directions for the present and the future. From the title, it is clear that the author's purpose is the construction of the imagination of urban planning as a collective social fact, that is, as a political practice of democratisation of the production of urban space, able to enhance the connective potential of the city, as a dynamic synthesis of the local and the global (PHELPS 2021, p. 7).

In this sense, planning can act as a vector of connection between social demands and political institutions: this practice, therefore, has a necessarily collective purpose, which distances itself from the images of cities as extractive machines. Accepting the challenge of technological innovation, of the city-network, for the author, means accepting social complexity and mobilising all the forces capable of imagining, in different forms, the variety in the shaping of places (ibid., p. 44).

What does urban planning imagination teach? It teaches to measure oneself with the creativity of imagination and with the materiality of innovation processes. In fact, a democratic use of available technologies would improve the quality of life by socialising the responsibility of data management, which smart cities projects advance. The dream of urban transformation can connect representative institutions with urban alternative projects, with movements for the right to the city, with platform workers' organisations, redefining urban governance itself. The process of decision-making, removed from the embrace between public and private, redefines sense and purpose of urban planning, because it can mediate between "horizontal" and "vertical", that is, between institutions and social needs:

"Moreover, conflict and contestation may be no worse in their urban planning outcomes than collaborative or communicative approaches in these contexts, as we saw (...) the latter appear to have generated largely empty words. (...) Research (...) suggests that conflictually statements at the outset of participatory urban planning exercises may promote better discussion than consensual statements." (PHELPS 2021, p. 121)

The meeting and the battle on these issues can really implement a different idea of the city as a space for all. The experiments from the Global South listed by PHELPS provide a set of practices with which to suture the democratic gap of technocapitalist urbanism and reactivate political participation in public space. Therefore, these possible decision-making assemblages must necessarily design new forms of urban development, and they must adapt to the dynamism of urban spaces and plan remedial forms of action for emerging issues. Consequently, the multi-scalar dimension of the city lends itself to diffuse and connective forms of urbanisation, capable of connecting local criticalities with global ones. The democratisation of metropolitan governance, in fact, undermines the imperial dimension of urban connection, and facilitates exchanges between different cities through specific networks.

As PHELPS writes, the emerging metropolises of the South are laboratories in which the innovative power of the connection between citizenry, economic agents, and state institutions is tested, materially, in the context of urban planning. At the same time, the author warns, the appeal of these models must be commensurate with the existence of political asymmetries and the global division of labour (ibid., p. 187). The central political problem, present between the lines of the argument, is the transformation of this shared imagination into concrete planning, anchored in the present, and looking forward. Can a democratic way to urban planning manifest itself? The author answers thus:

"Contemporary urban planning – especially that concerned with promoting the social, environmental and economic sustainability and resilience of cities – increasingly appears to involve elements of experimentation (...) which in turn appear to involve new mixes of citizens, club and state actors." (PHELPS 2021, p. 196)

Recovering the imaginative power of urban planning, in conclusion, means recovering the democratic potential of the city. PHELPS, guiding the reader and scholar through the field of urbanism, emphasises the merits of a new shared urban imagination, while at the same time not hiding the risks and dissolving dynamics. If, philosophically, imagination is the common form of knowledge (allow us this brief excursus), urban imagination can and should be the implementation of collective urban governance practices, namely the production of imaginaries related to the concept of “right to the city”. Existing networks between cities on specific issues (against the “touristification” in Southern Europe, for example) go in the direction of the multiplication of collective decision-making spaces, and constitute a collective alternative, certainly to be verified materially, to the model of the capitalist city (and, of course, all its articulations) prevailing today.

To conclude, the books (partially) discussed in this paper have the merit of framing, from several points, the capitalist transformations of urban space, highlighting the lack of democracy and the pursuit of profit that drives the pushes for technological acceleration from above. The emptying of meaning of urban space, in fact, corresponds to the precise design of capitalist restructuring to make the city a computerised automaton, a perfectible machine model managed by private algorithmic systems. But we can and must invert the meaning of the “smart city” and connect it to collective urban planning projects. Hyperconnectivity, in this case, can amplify and intensify the exchange of practices, thoughts and imaginations related to alternatives, discursive and material, to put in place to counter the capitalist plan. If the city is the “*living flesh*” of social interactions, we need to rediscover the democratic value of collective participation, especially in the field of urban planning. To paraphrase Giancarlo DE CARLO, we need to take the urban imagination away from the experts and give it back to the people who can make a different use of it.