The UNINHABITABLE?

In between Collapsed Yet Still Rigid Distinctions

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Abstract **The extent to which certain kinds of people are inundated with toxins, pollutants, bacteria, viruses, violence, and disaster is well documented. The various ways in which the extension of urbanization as a planetary phenomenon has refigured geographies of sustenance is also well established. This article focuses, instead, on exploring the interfacial oscillations among that which is experienced as habitable or uninhabitable, as a kind of regionalizing of relationships between life and nonlife. It looks at how possibilities of living disappear and reappear, often in the least expected situations and circumstances, and at how inhabitation itself becomes increasingly precarious through various devices and calculations deployed in order to guarantee it. Drawing upon decades of research and program development in urban Africa and Southeast Asia, the article explores some of ways in which the habitable and uninhabitable are redescribed in terms of each other and considers how this redescription could be used to formulate more judicious modalities of viable urban development, as urbanization itself seems to posit increased dangers to the viability of many lives.**

Keywords **urbanization, collective life, politics of habitation, Global South**

Many African and Asian cities and urban regions are considered bastions of the uninhabitable. They are the homes of marginalized black and brown bodies, but they cannot really be homes because their environments are incompatible with what normally would be required for human sustenance. Because these cities are widely considered to be the responsibility of those who inhabit them, the fact that they appear as uninhabitable also renders their inhabitants not

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fully human. There is a cruel irony in this, as some of the most spectacular architectural and engineering feats of urban built environments are being constructed next to apparent wastelands, further eroding long-honed, albeit problematic, sociability (Roy and Ong 2011; Marshall 2003; Fu and Murray 2014).

That large numbers of these inhabitants are extracted from Africa and Asia—once through slavery, and now through both forced and voluntary migrations—so that a global economy can be conceived and materialized elsewhere constitutes an inextricable dependency of the fully human on those considered not so. It also solidifies the conditions through which that dependency can be disavowed or produced as a relationship of fundamental, natural inequality. That many African and Asian urban regions remain inundated with an underclass is thus proof of the normality of an uneven distribution of space that either will not be overcome or is rectified only through an almost unfathomable deployment of effort and resources (DiMuzio 2008; Ghertner 2010; Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Heron 2011). This view also suggests that a definitive and unyielding image of urban efficacy and human thriving exists and should be the object of aspiration for those living in supposedly uninhabitable spaces (Legg 2007; Heller and Evans 2010; Roy 2009; Shepherd, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013).

Questions about what is inhabitable or not have long defined the nature and governance of urban life (Foucault 2009; Thacker 2009; Adams 2014). There is also a massive, varied literature that articulates the relationships among dispossession, the expropriation of resourcefulness, the constitution of property, the dissolution of collective solidarities, the circumscription of maneuverability, the imposition of law, and the autonomy of market, and, in doing so, accounts for the figuration of what counts as urban habitation (Amin 1974; Lubeck and Walton 1979; King 1989; Bhala and Lapeyre 1997; Glassman and Samatar 1997; Chakrabarty 2000; Hart 2002; Harvey 2003; Blomley 2004; Sparke 2007; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009; McCann and Ward 2010; Glassman 2011; Chaudhury 2012; Rossi 2013). Without denying the ravages of long-term structural impoverishment to which many African and Asian cities are subjected, we can ask whether the so-called uninhabitable does not necessarily point to a depleted form of urban life but simply to a different form—one that constantly lives under specific threats and incompletion. But as long as our imaginations, policies, and governing practices adhere to a tightly drawn sense of what constitutes normal humanity, it is difficult to recognize such urban life as a generative difference (Huyssen 2008; Robinson 2013). As long as cities, or large swathes of territory within them, are seen as fundamentally uninhabitable—as incapable of generating new capacities and in dire need of rescue and remaking through the massive infusion of external resources or a renewed commitment to a vast repertoire of disciplinary tools—the critical impetus is lost from which to make these cities something else than they are now.

As a reading of Gilles Deleuze (1995) would indicate, these different modes of the habitable cannot be part of an overarching program of development for a particular social body or territory; they do not presume the existence of a living entity to which they contribute. Rather, maneuvers toward such equity of possibilities must disrupt the calculations that assume a particular kind of distribution of authority or capacity among preexistent identities. Instead, the focus might be on

the emergent figurations of social bodies constituted through the intersections of different ways of inhabiting the urban. "It is because of the action of the field of individuation that such and such differential relations and such and such distinctive points (pre-individual fields) are actualised" (Deleuze 1995: 247). As Achille Mbembe (2013) indicates, inhabitants situated in the cross fires of trajectories of sense and subjugation take and do what they can to create fugitive, slippery spaces, always under the grip of some imposed redemptive maneuvers that never quite succeed.

Given the persistence of base subjugations operating under the auspices of a continuously inventive capitalism, which has promised to leave colonially imposed differences far behind (Chakrabarty 2012), how is it possible to upend the distinctions between the inhabitable and uninhabitable as clear demarcations of specific dispositions? How might they be seen as operations of subterfuge or critique—practices that take nothing for granted, that lend stability and possibilities of transformation to the precarious, or that undermine the pretensions of all that is considered secure? At the same time, we need to retain these distinctions as a way of stopping ourselves from thinking that, no matter what crises and conditions people face, somehow resilient adaptation is always possible.

Based on long-term work in urban Africa and, more recently, Jakarta, this article attempts to generate some strategic reflections on how to think about such an interstice of effaced and sustained distinctions between the habitable and uninhabitable. This is particularly done in the context of accelerated transformations and obduracies in mega-urban regions of what was considered to be the Global South. I want to explore some of the ways in which the habitable and uninhabitable are, and can be, redescribed in terms of each other.

The cities from which most of the article's ethnographic details are drawn, though major metropolitan areas in their own right, have historically been at the fringes of where normative urban planning and policymaking has been constituted. While significant arguments have been made about the salience of the urban margins for generating "pilot projects" in urban development, later generalized to the metropoles of economic and political power (King 1989; Wright 2002), the persistent singularities of urban processes in cities like Kinshasa and Jakarta are not easily mobilized to disarm this normative. Nevertheless, they pose a swirling of details that continuously grate against, circumvent, or infect the materializing of particular instantiations of the urban and that open up the possibilities of many rhythmic modulations of the relationships between power, policy, and popular practices. This is what Valentina Napolitano (2015: 57) calls "the part of an urban re-articulation (that) has become the material trace of a knotting of histories and condensation of fears, violence, intimacies and forms of belonging."

The cities invoked here have been subjected to imperial and colonial projects of varying traction, violence, and efficacy. Places like Kinshasa, Khartoum, and Jakarta were built with all kinds of complicities, seductions, and betrayals, and as such they exude ambiguous, troubling memories etched into the built environment. They nevertheless retain the details of what might have been, of projects only partially realized, of collectively self-constructed built environments that sometimes demonstrate inordinate capacities to create viable livelihoods out of dispersed fragments. But they also reveal

messy, unwieldy, and often violent natures that push and pull people and materials in many directions, throwing them off balance and into a lifetime of half-baked compensations.

In the extension of urbanization across a planetary trajectory, these details are seemingly subject to an unprecedented effacement, even as variously scaled urban regimes mobilize them as materials to enable the emplacement of investment and speculation (Brenner and Schmid 2015). Kinshasa and Jakarta, different as they are from each other (and as they are from everywhere else), may not be the epicenters from which a critique of the urban normative might be most effectively issued. Still, the uncertain interfaces of their relationships with the larger world, reflected in both the speed at which they are being remade and the endurance of long-honed capacities to build economies through collaborative social relations, make them critical sites in this project of redescription—states of existence that *might* be.

In an era where the normality of any standardized version of humanity is continuously upended in the constantly mutating assemblages of biological, technological, and digital materials, notions about what constitutes normal urban residence continue to be applied to the ways in which the value and efficacy of African and Asian urbanities are judged. A supposedly countervailing move, whereby the resilience and resourcefulness of those who have almost nothing is emphasized, ends up reiterating these same versions. This is because resilience is usually couched in a form of surprise, a kind of "yes, even the poor have a way of proving their humanity." Surviving the uninhabitable then becomes testament to a human will and capacity that minimizes the impact of injustices past and present (Dawson 2009). It feeds into claims that if only the inhabitants of these cities would do what humans are truly capable of doing and apply their skills of survival to the urgencies at hand, then new cities would be truly possible (Amin 2013; MacKinnon and Derickson 2013).

Those that inhabit the supposedly uninhabitable are subject to seemingly endless lists of deprivation. Hundreds of research projects have demonstrated correlations between health, mortality, environmental conditions, economic poverty, spatial exclusion, racial identity, and political justice. But to what extent do these indices of deprivation and violence normalize as uninhabitable the places where many people attempt to make a life. Normative moral inclinations would seem to render intolerable conditions that shorten lives, waste potentials, and produce debilitating traumas, misery, and chronic illness. Such inclinations would seem to compel the alleviation of suffering and the empowerment of human capacity.

But we have to consider the extent to which these moral inclinations get in the way of seeing and understanding the collective memories, the exchanges and reciprocities, the breakthroughs and failures, and the material residues of countless efforts to endure through conditions that are perceived and experienced in many different ways by these residents. While survival entails what has to be done, endurance considers what "ought to be done" (Negarestani 2014). The two do not necessarily intersect or remain separate, and both are operative in the everyday lives of those who occupy the uninhabitable. There is the creation and relationship to a ground, a place, and an infrastructure of individual and collective existence, no matter how provisional, improvised, or run-down.

In cities where the machinery of decision-making, planning, resource allocation, and service provision hobbles along in bureaucratic ineptness, improvised deals, and massively skewed distributions, the majority of inhabitants still largely rule their own worlds. They do so to the extent that they continuously construct and update the practices, designs, and materials that are put to work in engineering spaces of inhabitation. Perhaps more importantly, many continue to reticulate the experiences, skills, perceptions, and networks of the people around them in order to materialize circuits through which needed goods, services, and information pass (Chattopadhyay 2006; Benjamin 2008; Bayat 2010; McFarlane 2011a; Nielsen 2011).

Everywhere and Nowhere Is Habitable

In many respects, the uninhabitable is an anachronistic concept—not simply in the fact that people have long built homes and economic activities on the surfaces of the most ruinous and dire conditions but also in the ways in which the uninhabitable, or what Austin Zeiderman (2013) calls "living dangerously," is used as the medium through which certain segments of cities are able to compel recognition of their existence. Additionally, they secure services and opportunities that would be beyond their grasp if they did not pose themselves as a population at risk. Habiting the uninhabitable then becomes the means through which the poor may enter into various entanglements of provisioning and compliance, where they gain a foothold as normative citizens and where the severity of the risks they face reiterate, rather than challenge, the functionality of liberal urban governance. Additionally, as Sally Sargeson (2013: 1076) points out in her examination of the expropriation of rural land in China, urbanization acts through a violence that demeans rural existence and inflicts long-lasting harm: "Re-zoning land for urban construction and expropriating it thus become means of resolving the purported problems of collective ownership, of transforming rural land and housing from dead capital into fungible assets that can be sold, leased and mortgaged, and spurring cycles of building, refurbishment, demolition and rebuilding. The violence of property definition, exclusion, land use regulation, zoning and expropriation constitutes urban development."

The uninhabitable is a tricky concept given the global drives to render everything habitable, no matter the quality. The impetus toward habitation appears across different scenarios and backgrounds. For example, while desert cities have existed for a long time, the massive conversion of desert climates into urban regions demonstrates a kind of perverse triumph of the built environment over physical terrain, albeit at enormous resource costs. This may be a long way from squatting on rubbish piles or covering squalid creeks with makeshift shanties, but it does point to a conviction that cities can refigure complex ecologies with complex adaptations and insulate themselves from adverse surroundings. That even the best-engineered cities succumb to volatile weather and floods is not yet a sufficient deterrent to this conviction.

That much of Asia has acted as fodder for the proof of developmental dreams—in the sense that backward economies, with determined and sometimes coercive governmental action and inward financial flows, could produce well-planned, thriving metropolises—and that much of Africa now seems poised to follow in these footsteps points to this sense of endlessly renewable habitation. But something else

may also be going on, for some cities seem to expand without clear economic logic.

Take Kinshasa, for example, which is the world's poorest city of its size. Although the historic core of the city fronts a semicircled river that acts as a national boundary—limiting the trajectories of where the city's physical growth can take place—the real boundaries of the city expand exponentially each year, so that one can still claim to be inside Kinshasa some 90 kilometers from that historic core. It is hard to precisely determine the demographics of the city. Depending on whom you talk to, its size ranges from 9 to 15 million, which is a lot of uncertainty, and even geographic information system analyses are hard-pressed to come up with reasonably accurate figures. Even allowing for the vast tracks of land near the center that are tied up as military encampments or the remnants of colonially demarcated buffer zones, much of the city hovers across tightly packed nodes dispersed across long distances.

So while many opportunities for systematic infilling may exist, the near universal perception in Kinshasa is that the city is moving elsewhere. As a result, many inhabitants hurry to stake their claims at ever-shifting peripheries, which still seem to be in the middle of nowhere. In order to maintain a staked claim, a household has to implant someone on site in order to protect it, as the relative newness and vacancy of these areas mean that households stay where they are for the moment. As this sense of expansion is materialized in all directions away from the river, households are also concerned about missing the "real action," so they will also stake additional claims in completely different parts of the city's periphery. While the actual acquisition of new property may not require large amounts of money, the fact that households have to support some kind of physical presence in these different locations, run back and forth between them along congested roads, and maintain household economies in the place where they have been all along—and where they have been barely making it—results in substantial expenditures of time and money.

As large numbers of residents are swept up in this anticipation, their efforts indeed urbanize the periphery, with markets, schools, churches, and outposts of administrative offices. The rendering of the bush into extensions of Kinshasa is, in part, driven by the "old standard" of driving up land values through speculation and the infusion of external finance, which jacks up property prices in older residential districts near the commercial core. Yet there is something almost evangelical in the determination of Kinois to stretch the city, as if these efforts offer some redemptive compensation for the difficulties most of them face just putting bread on the table.

As Filip De Boeck (De Boeck and Plissart 2004; De Boeck 2011, 2012) in his magisterial writings on the city points out, Kinshasa is a city of microinfrastructures and the power of the minimum, where the exigency is to make as much as possible out of articulating imagination and small things and to insert oneself into every conceivable interstice, using whatever is available as a support for commercial activity. It is important to find just the right location to capture someone's fleeting inclination to buy something from you at a moment's notice, to perform everyday life as if it were full of abundance, even though most of the population is living on less than US$1 a day.

As De Boeck indicates, Kinshasa is a city of the "now," in that it emphasizes the need for individuals to be prepared to act in many different places and in many

different ways without warning, without preparation. This orientation reinforces the tentativeness of social life, because the ability to affirm a collective body requires a sense of delay, of memory, of rehearsing ways different backgrounds and capacities can work together. I talk to you, you talk to me, we talk to others, and in the process, we acquire memory and develop understanding based on the delays involved in this process—the circuits of call and response and call again. But in Kinshasa the imperatives to act without reference, the immediacy of the all or nothing, make the consolidation of social life difficult.

Kinshasa is a city that both frightens and surprises itself with its endurance. So expressions of confidence take shape through these investments in the city's extension—to make habitable that which lies fallow. A bush is a city in waiting.

It does not seem to matter that these sentiments make daily life all the more difficult. Running around to manage an extended presence in the urban region leaves little time to tend to more localized relationships. In a city where many youth are deeply suspicious of the adults closest to them, where early death is usually explained as the malicious actions of immediate family, where the management of critical cultural conventions—usually the purview of elders—is seized upon by youth as an expression of the vacuum of any real authority, households would seem to make their current addresses more uninhabitable as the impulse for new habitation intensifies. So the relationship between the habitable and uninhabitable oscillates, diverges, and reconnects in ways that make the provision of "new land" and new opportunities something that extends and builds upon the solidity of the existent city but also, at the same time, seems to waste it.

In the ambiguity of this relationship, we are reminded of what Michael Taussig (1980, 1984, 1995) talks about as "devil pacts" in his ethnographies of the Columbian Pacific. The determination to convert land into platforms for the production or extraction of things whose final use is elsewhere upends intricate ecological systems, which have provided living zones for creatures of all kinds. It generates wealth that can only be wasted. What is excessive to the necessity to live—the cultivation of cash crops, the effluvial toxicity of mined streams—takes the form of exorbitant profit that can only be managed as a pact with the devil, as the willingness to undermine the very supports of life. The will to inhabit everything produces the uninhabitable through both the conceit that any part of the earth is available for habitation and the conceit that the act of inhabiting proves its own worth, one that needs no further justification. The immanent conclusion of this process is that there may be nowhere left to go, as these acts of inhabitation leave more extensive footprints—imprinted in every aspect of the earth and its atmosphere—undone only in unimaginable time scales (Morton 2013).

The extension of Kinshasa into its hinterlands prolongs a game that potentially runs out of space and time, as the impacts of urbanization "talk back" through the shrinkage of virtuous terrain. As such, there is much worried discussion in Africa and Asia about the massive demographic shifts portended by climate change, about future impossibilities for the inhabitation of coastal and semiarid cities. These are addressed through the acceleration of technological innovations that attempt to readapt populations to increasingly aquatic urban environments, by seeking ways to mitigate the impacts of extreme weather,

or by shifting developments to what is considered safer ground. What I suggest is not so much that the designs and technicities of adaptation are not useful but that we have to find ways of detaching them from the belief that they can prolong our normative orientations and will to habitation.

Equally troubling is the inversion of this position. Instead of acting as if all places and conditions are potentially habitable, incipient forms of urban governance act as if the ability to inhabit is not as important as the ability to "ride the uninhabitable." It as if "to reside" means "to surf": to ride the crests, the ebbs and swells, of greater or lesser turbulence (Braun 2014). To sustain place is less important than to speed up the diffusion of crisis, to speed up the dissociation of places from cumbersome histories, so that these places can be hedged against the other. Places become embodiments for the calculation of risks. They are emptied of specific content and repackaged as indices of investment, capable of turning damaged materials and lives into harvests of yet to be determined products or capacities. The emphasis here is on the ability to harness whatever takes place, whether habitable or not.

No Secrets about What Is Going On

Even when coupled as the mirror image of our will to habitation, notions of the uninhabitable would seem anachronistic in light of the evidence it is possible to amass about the facts of where and how people live. If a certain part of the definition of the uninhabitable entails the extent to which a particular place is closed off from access to a larger world or is, in turn, relatively impermeable to incursions from the outside, then, in this respect, no place is uninhabitable. Even in the most seemingly depleted cities—Maiduguri, Bangui, Juba, Homs, or Gaza—there are doors to walk through. It is not the doors, the ways in and out, that particular cities seem to lack but rather a notion of where these doors lead. Are they like doors in a large house, which lead progressively across spaces a person can feel as connected, as somehow linked to each other? Or do the doors open onto to some kind of "Alice in Wonderland" reality, where the urgency of getting out of a particular city usually leads to doors that open onto completely disorienting experiences, where it is nearly impossible to attain a foothold or a clear sense of what is going on? In a world where every inch of the earth's surface can be surveyed, from which information can be drawn and specific persons or buildings targeted, little remains unknown.

In the past, what was considered known was a matter of what surveying eyes were interested in paying attention to. Vast interiors of supposedly uninhabited neighborhoods were not considered worth the effort that would have been required to engage with them. For long periods of time, important population centers in major cities were not even designated on maps because they were bastions of illegal occupation and poverty. It was not worth paying attention to the bidonvilles, periurban settlements, shantytowns, or even long-honed popular working and lower-middle-class districts because there was nothing going on there of any importance. Nothing was taking place, and as such, there was nothing to see.

Such occlusion sometimes could operate to the advantage of a particular part of the city. In the outer regions of Khartoum's Omdurman district, just before the city met the desert, where I lived for three years, there was a densely compacted maze of mud structures that from the air looked like the crumbling remains

of some vast and abandoned way station. Yet, Souk Libya, as this place was known, was a pounding market where virtually everything was for sale, from the latest East Asian electronics to surface-to-air missiles to herds of sheep and camels. Brokers of at least fifteen different African nationalities controlled specific sectors of the market, and traders came from as far away as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Tanzania, mediating deals across the Middle East. Everyone in Khartoum claimed to have known about the market, had gone there once or twice, but it still functioned as a public secret, a place beyond regulation and policing, because at its surface, it always exuded the sense that nothing happened there.

Now we live in an era where nothing is to be missed, where the prevailing assumption is that something is going on, no matter how a place looks, and that all places are prospects for making money. The higher the risks, the more potential for money to be made or lost. Part of the impetus of this interest is the recognition that the purportedly abandoned or backward parts of the world are fertile grounds for the implantation of terrorists. Even if this may be the case, the capacity of such "invaders" to demonstrate the viability of these places as platforms for making money may be more salient. The Sahara is a busy sea of transshipment of all kinds, and somehow the doors of the most seemingly marginal towns of Asia and Africa open directly onto Dubai and Guangzhou.

Of course, within specific towns and cities, there is great variance in the availability of particular doors, as many inhabitants are relegated to highly circumscribed spaces of operation; they may barely know anything outside their immediate vicinity, let alone anything about a larger world. No matter how much the world may come to them, through media, cellphones, Internet, information, and rumor, most of the doors available open to the same room. There are times when these doors are tightly controlled, as if, in a larger world of operations, it is important to keep prying eyes away in order to protect the little you have or to exert a semblance of control over a capacity to reach beyond it.

Just as Chungking Mansions—that one-square-block warren of "guesthouses," small restaurants, and trading stalls in Hong Kong that has long served as a favorite metaphor for the opacities of "old school" international trade—is divided up into different turf, where exits, stairwells, and elevators are "secured" by various groups, much conflict in cities is also about "controlling the doors": the entrances and exits. In Maiduguri, Nigeria, for example, the intensity of violence deployed by Boko Haram is largely about controlling where the doors will go. In its seemingly pathological fear of education and other public institutions, the group suggests that the extinction of the poor is through a door right around the corner and that the only thing they have to work with is an adamant and stark rendering of faith (Agbiboa 2014).

For many urban inhabitants, walking through such doors has left them feeling that their lives are situated in the middle of the doorway—that no matter how many thresholds they cross, no matter how much knowledge they may have about any given place in their city, they are somewhere in the middle between the habitable and uninhabitable. This is an ambivalence that all the information-saturated tagging of environments will not undo. No matter how available regression-analyzed correlations among real estate values, availability of amenities, public services, history of

property transactions, rates of growth, demographic profiles, capital investments, and local government budgetary allocations may be to any smartphone user inquiring about a specific location, a gnawing sense of uncertainty may remain (Stiegler 2013; Fisher 2014).

In Bangkok, for example, the city always tries to "retain face" despite all efforts to deface it. In other words, the city remains full of markers—the surfaces of shrines, historical monuments, sexual economies, and mass consumption—that seemingly provide an unyielding sense of history and orientation. This prolonging of a sense of distinctive doors that interconnect different spaces of life into virtuous contiguities entails the responsibility to forget. The Bangkok resident must forget that the need to retain the calmness of surfaces—this sense that one door leads to another, from king to monk to shopkeeper to businessmen to sex worker to tourist—has wreaked havoc on the city in terms of its infrastructure, natural resources, and built environment (King 2008). Within many of the cheap condominiums where many Bangkok residents now live, there is an incessant anxiety about the appearance of ghosts, spurring discussions about the yearning for the happiness of an earlier time, however entangled with poverty and messiness it may have been (Johnson 2013). At the same time, there is an abiding fascination with the hypersexualized and disembodied digital landscapes that would seem to suggest the undoing of the cultural references through which that former happiness is expressed.

This ambivalence suggests a critical conundrum in working through the politics of habitation. For who is to determine what is habitable and what is not, and according to what criteria? How do we take the present distribution of habitation across many places normatively considered to be uninhabitable and decide where people can live or not, and under what circumstances? In the exigencies to raise money for needed infrastructure, to provide work for a more youthful urban population, to work out more functional balances between maximizing the value of physical assets and assuring that the city remains affordable for its residents, the standards used in constituting normative habitation become more homogeneous and constrained precisely during an era in which we are more aware then ever before of the sheer plurality of situations that people are inhabiting.

In providing a narrower series of formats for how people live, and for spatializing the distribution of these formats in ways that require many to live at great distances from "where the action is" (without having much action really going on, in the places they do live), the doors that residents navigate increasingly lead into an open-ended, generalized world. The features of this world may be easily recognizable but without much of a sense of differentiation, anchorage, or mediation. No matter how race-infused the sensibility of "us and them" might have been, doors now seem to open up onto a diffuse sense of "us and us," where inhabitants have to figure themselves out in relationship to a largely undifferentiated world of individuals who are in almost exactly the same boat as they are. These are doors that would seem to leave little room for exchange, reciprocity, and collaboration (Berardi 2009).

For in the spaces of inhabitation where things and bodies did *not* seem properly spaced out or organized—and are now largely resented by many for their messiness, dysfunction, and the amount of time and effort required to make things work and for people to get along—there

was often a dynamic practice of social interchange. Different ways of doing things had to pass through each other, had to find ways to translate their differences, and sometimes made use of these differences as tools to assemble collaborations and deals between very different kinds of activities and backgrounds. Doors led to different experiences and spaces, and thus doors themselves meant something: as rites of passage, as infrastructures of mediation, or as tools for letting things in and out but in various exposures and intensities. Doors need not be open or closed all the way in order to allow different angles and perspectives (Smart and Lin 2007; Telles and Hirata 2007; Bayat 2010; Millar 2014; Vasudevan 2014).

How can we operate somewhere between the tightening standardization of habitation—with all its pretenses of producing and regulating new types of individuals—and making the uninhabitable a new norm, where value rests in what can be constantly converted, remade, or readapted? Such a middle is not so much a new regime, imaginary, or place; rather, it is a way of drawing lines of connection among the various instances and forms of habitation, in order to find ways of making them have something to do with each other beyond common abstractions (for example, the abstraction that slums are reservoirs of cheap labor, or that innovation is fodder for gentrification).

Why Doesn't What Works Actually Work?

A current key objective of urban transformation is to construct high-density affordable neighborhoods that include green space, access to transportation, and opportunities for work and also have the ability to generate work through a diversity of residential and commercial composition. Many of the so-called popular, largely self-constructed districts mixing working and lower-middle-class inhabitants would seem to pose viable concretizations of this objective. For the past eight years, I have lived and worked in several intensely heterogeneous central city districts in Jakarta. These are districts replete with different residential histories, built environments, economic livelihoods, and social compositions. During this time, I have had hundreds of opportunities for both formal and informal conversations with residents from different walks of life.

These districts have never rested on their laurels, nor have they become calcified into a shaping of property that necessitates the defense of integrity or tradition. The capacity of such districts to accommodate, manage, and make the most of their heterogeneous composition is largely contingent upon continuous renovation and recalibration. It is hard work, because if you want to create room for adaptation and for economic activity and sociability to affect each other productively, then no single actor or activity should enjoy a disproportionate value or advantage.

Such districts may be at a disadvantage in terms of managing how energy, water, sanitation, waste removal, material inputs, and commodities are connected to each other in a reliable fashion. But residents remain attuned to each other through their very efforts to make, repair, and sustain the connections among these urban resources. Districts may not simply be crowded with people but also crowded with aspirations, tactical maneuvers, and conflicts. These push their way into district space and require significant expenditures of tolerance, local ingenuity, and mediation, as the strict delegation of responsibilities to specific individuals, groups, or institutions cannot always come up with the adaptations necessary in a

timely fashion. Because districts of such intensities may have to reproduce similar functions with a changing cast of characters, knowledge about how to run things is spread around. But, at times, it also leaves gaps in terms of deciding who has the authority to intervene in particular problems. In other words, disadvantages come with the advantages; it is not a clear story of win-win benefits. Nevertheless, there is much that can be worked with, in terms of what already exists.

If you walk through the central city districts of Serdang, Utan Panjang, Sumar Batu, Cempeka Baru, and Harapan Mulya in central Jakarta, you will see an enormous diversity of residential situations. As is true of any large city, the citizens have complaints and irritations. But these largely self-constructed areas provide both enough differences to allow the congealing of particular lifestyles and enough commonality to mitigate any sense that residents of different walks of life constitute a threat to each other.

The question becomes why such districts, embodying many of the characteristics that most urban policymakers and planners would want in so-called sustainable development, aren't viewed as the resources they indeed may be. While the majority of edifices may be small, rather cramped pavilions, there are no structural or prohibitive financial considerations that would prevent vertical development of four to five stories, within the existent legal allowance. Could the infrastructure bear such a potential increase in population load? Here, again, Jakarta, through a past World Bank–coordinated neighborhood improvement project, demonstrated that significant increases in carrying capacity can take place in situ as long as conjunctions between primary and subsidiary systems are adjusted (Tunas and Peresthu 2010).

Undoubtedly the location of such districts near the heart of the city exerts pressures upon them, particularly as medium-scale enterprises, such as banks, automobile dealerships, restaurant chains, and supermarkets extend outward, driving up land prices and drawing commercial-based revenues into municipal coffers. Still, many districts have demonstrated an ability to roll with these punches; for example, local entrepreneurial networks can coalesce and up-scale their own operations, and neighborhood residents can add on rooms to rent in order to cover increases in property taxes. These considerations suggest that barriers to local productions of centrally located districts are less about technical or fiscal impediments and more about a truncated idea of what exists across these districts and a limited view of what can be viable.

This is not a matter of looking closer in order to discover a kernel of truth and salvation. Keep in mind Joseph Conrad's injunction that the closer we look at things, the less pretty they are. In fact, it is often hard to really tell what people are doing, why they are doing it, and where all of it is going to take them.

When I step out of my house in Jakarta and into a small lane and then turn the corner onto a busy street, I step into the midst of many things: I step into a seemingly interminable argument between two storekeepers over whose responsibility it is to make sure that the trash container doesn't overflow; I greet two young men who voluntarily sweep the streets for several hours every morning in order to strike up quick conversations with people waiting for transportation to go to work; I notice the beginnings and endings of furtive couplings in the cheap by-the-hour hotels; I often join a convocation of customers at the small *warungs* (eating

places), where we compare notes and plot both sensible and outrageous conspiracies to increase our incomes; I sometimes join the lineup of devotees in front of the shabby office of a major local politician who moonlights as a spiritual advisor; I try to avoid the constant loading and unloading of trucks that, in the frenzy, frequently deliver goods to "wrong" destinations; I sometimes feel part of the constant milling about of people of all ages who seem to be waiting for real responsibilities but nevertheless feed the street with eyes and rumors; I am always surprised by the daily appearance of some new construction or alteration, of something going wrong and being left unfixed for only seconds or for decades; I am in the midst of battered or bored people who dispiritedly pursue the same routines and routes, and I am also in the midst of people who approach this street, where they have spent every day of their lives, as if it were the first time.

These multiple encounters and parallel, separated enactments, neither "good" nor "bad," are the substrate of the popular district. They are its real politics, even as hierarchies of authority and institutions are also obviously in place. Varying distributions of capacities—to affect and be affected, to bring things into relationship, to navigate actual or potential relations—are political matters. These are matters about who gets to acquire particular emotional patterns, thresholds, and triggers, and they are connected to a complex virtual field of differential practice, what John Protevi (2009) calls *bodies politic*. What he means by *body politic* is the unfolding of a history of bodily experience, of specific modulations on ongoing processes of people and things encountering each other.

What we might think as the *virtual* is not some hidden potential that informs what a person's life could mean or the potentials lying in wait in any event. Rather, the virtual is the way that any encounter spins off into all kinds of directions and inclinations, as that encounter has enfolded different kinds of desires and perceptions to begin with. The question is where does this spinning-off take someone, what will they make it of it, what other encounters will be sought out, avoided, or accidentally impelled. This activation of the virtual—all of the encounters a person has inside and outside the house, at work, in the streets, in institutions—informs what a body is able to do at any particular time, where she or he does it, and what it is possible to perceive and pay attention to in a given environment, as each body acts on, moves through, other bodies.

This notion of bodies politic is important because it shows how the functioning of districts full of different kinds of people, backgrounds, and activities does not work by residents forging some sense of community—or that collaborations among them are primarily honed through a consensus of interests, division of labor, or proficient organizing techniques. Rather, things work out through an intensely politicized intermixing of different forces, capabilities, inclinations, styles, and opportunities that stretch and constrain what it is possible for residents of any given background or status to do. No matter what formal structures, stories, powers, or institutions come to bear on what takes place, no matter how they leave their mark, there is a constant process of encountering, pushing and pulling, wheeling and dealing, caring for and undermining. These encounters tend to keep most everyone "in play"—able to maneuver and pursue, if not all of the time, at least for a portion of most days.

The persistent repetition of, even hounding of urban residents with, the

supposedly proper images of middle-class attainment and overall well-being chips away at the convictions residents may retain about their abilities to construct viable living spaces for themselves. Time becomes an increasingly precious commodity, particularly as maximizing consumption and skill sets remain a critical indicator of self-worth. A younger generation of urban residents is more eager to escape the obligations of tending for parents and kin, let alone neighborhoods where the "rules" for belonging may become more stringent and politicized. A widening dispersal of interests and commitments are harder to piece together into complementary relationships and collaborations. The efforts at repairing and developing things that were once matters of voluntary association more and more seem to require a formalized, contractual deployment of labor.

There is a widespread sense that popular districts in Jakarta's urban core are finished, overladen with anachronistic business practices, excessive demands on people's time, and altogether too enmeshed in uncertainty to prove dynamic in the long run. Another consideration is the enduring frustration on the part of residents with the tedious bureaucracies, corruption, and wasted time entailed by the older formats of the urban core. At times there appears to be an almost universal vilification of how bad things are run, and these images are not innocent, since they are used to encourage resettlement in megacomplexes that exude the impression of efficiency and transparency, where everything is "run by the book."

But these impressions are tricky, because neighborhoods increasingly vilified for being full of shakedowns, skewed deals, moneylending, compounding interest, favors, sorcery, overinvoicing, resale, gambling, extortion, loaded gifts, kickbacks, pay-to-play, and hoarding then morph into statistical tendencies, branding, big data sets, probabilities, risk profiles, stochastic modeling, preemptive intervention, analytics-as-service, interoperable standards, clouds, and ubiquitous positioning. The ethical implications and efficacy of the latter are not necessarily more advanced or clearer than those of the former. As thick social fabrics are torn asunder or coaxed into more individualistic pursuits of consumption and well-being, there are no clear visions or practices for how residents, still operating in close proximity to each other, will deal with each other in the long run, especially in circumstances where urban economies are unable to provide work for an increasingly youthful population.

Displacing outmoded urban governments with purportedly more efficient and transparent municipal administrations may provide momentary optimism to a more educated young generation of urban residents. But these municipal endeavors to ensure more just environments for both the poor and the middle class fail to grapple with the degree to which the real economic underpinnings of cities are largely configured elsewhere. A vast substrate of deals, accommodations, and compensations are necessary in order to sustain the lawfulness and efficacy of urban policy (Swyngedouw 2009; Chatterjee 2011).

Part of the issue is that many cities of the "South," no matter where they are, become subject to an increasing number of claims. The ability for anyone to definitively stake a claim necessitates widening interdependencies on relations and things that, on the surface, might not seem to have anything to do with a particular

piece of land, building, or urban resource (Ribera-Fumaz 2009; Goldman 2011; Raco, Imrie, and Lin 2011; Caldeira 2012; Gazdar and Mallah 2013). Dispossessions and repossessions then multiply (Banerjee-Guha 2010).

This proliferation of relationalities can be seen through the use of sophisticated number-crunching packages, where a larger volume of relationships is made for us, instead of us trying to figure how things are connected. This figuring-out of connections was one of the key skills and preoccupations of residents inhabiting popular districts. The figuring-out, in many ways, was a practice of inhabitation. Now, parametric designs, which bring together different data sets related to water, finance, energy, transportation, housing, economy, individual and group behavior, and so on, modulate the variable relationships among them and alter their properties as a result. Water, energy and sanitation, financing, transport, municipal finance, and economic development all have an impact on each other through recursive feedback loops (Parisi 2012).

The very act of trying to better control things, while opening up new vistas of knowledge, also produces unpredictable and unfixable relationships. In other words, we live in cities where things are inevitably linked and related, which gets rid of the will to actually make things relate—to coax, induce, seduce, incentivize. To move on, then, means to go nowhere, since one is locked into, indebted to, surrounded by all kinds of apparatuses—of recognition, security, legitimacy, correctness. Divisions exist between those whose interminable debts require them to stay in place, so that they aren't having the rug constantly pulled out from under them, and between those who are able to operate without any rug at all, in almost any environment whatsoever. Here the uninhabitable becomes a place in which one can be located, whereas the habitable becomes a privilege of not needing a specific abode.

If the desire to figure out the relationships among things is diminished as a by-product of increasingly formatted and programmed environments, then the very incentive for substantiating relational knowledge is undermined. This is the knowledge about how to act and how to make use of varying kinds of relations. However messy and untenable certain heterogeneous urban environments may have been, they were a context for the skilling of residents in the conduct of relations. These relations may not have been consistently generous, tolerant, or wide-ranging. Nonetheless, they were "all over the place" and took inhabitants to many different "places," even if physically they covered little ground. There was a mixture of sentiments and practices that coexisted, uneasily and sometimes destructively, but that nevertheless generated the capacities of residents to ply their potential resourcefulness (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005; McFarlane 2011b).

Part of the work of being in the city includes acquiring a range of literacies that have to be honed over time; part of the importance of everyday urban practices is that they constitute a repository for this urban learning, enabling knowledge about how to forge and conduct new relationships among people, places, and things. An important role for public policy, then, is to consider how institutions can pay attention to the logics and dynamics of the everyday in order to creatively animate a broader public awareness of the relationships between justice, redistribution, climate adaptation, and infrastructural change.

Recasting urban life is then at the core of such a pedagogic social-learning project. If digital and new media are introducing new parameters for subjectivity, how do we think about new collective practices, about focal and aggregation points, so that new cultural practices emerge? Rather than leaving the work of collective aggregation to consumption machines or so-called fundamentalist traditions, we need to explore new social contexts, procedures, modalities, and institutions of social learning as ways of substantiating new ways of being together.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this essay with a concrete example of how residents in one district of Jakarta appear to navigate the interstices of the habitable and uninhabitable that have been the "thicket" of consideration here. Kampung Rawa in central Jakarta, near the Senen rail station, was historically the port of call for many incoming migrants to the city. As the city's densest district, it is crammed with a mix of long-term residents, mostly eking out a minimal income, and newcomers attracted to the prospect of acquiring and remaking cheap property. The residents in this district have block-by-block solidarities and have invented kinship relations among neighbors; they also have forged strong ties to the various tricks, scams, and petty parasitism that make up daily life. They are widely known for being able to maneuver their way through the city, switching back and forth among performances of religious devotion, gangland bravado, entrepreneurial acumen, and inventive social and political collaborations.

Yet the district remains heavily redlined by official institutions; youth have a hard time getting more than low-level jobs. The place is so crowded that most household members have to take turns sleeping, leaving some to roam the streets at all hours. At the same time, more renovations and physical adaptations are going on in Kampung Rawa than in almost any other part of the city, and on any given day the place can be celebrated and vilified by the same people. Whatever objective readings could be taken of the conditions here, the sense its residents make of the place goes in all kinds of directions. The words they use to identify themselves vary across a wide register, as do their assessments of the likely future. Is the place poor or not? Safe or not? Viable or not? Most residents can provide detailed and reasonable answers either way. But even if the sense they make collectively remains in the form of something in-between, most are prepared to act strategically, no matter which way the answer goes.

It is important to keep this politics of sense-making in mind as cities, particularly those in the so-called Global South, are inundated with new imaginations, designs, and plans to make them more sustainable, just, productive, and generative of financial value. Regardless of the contradictions among these aspirations, a great deal of attention, money, and projects are brought to bear in cities like Kinshasa and Jakarta. As such, there is the need to more explicitly understand the political institutional gridlock that characterizes most cities. While knowing the deleterious ecological footprint of urbanization, the systemic nature of the gridlock, and the degrees and types of uncertainty involved, there is general consensus that a radical restructuring of the material base of cities will be necessary, even though few seem to know how to bring this about or are willing to make substantial changes in their own behavior to do so.

Nevertheless, this need can be strategically engaged so as to produce new forms of sociality. This will entail piggybacking on and rewiring existing policy networks that cut across national divides, as well as forging interconnections among stylistically divergent activist and civic projects. But the intersection will take place not on abstract notions of cooperation or civic responsibility but on the resonances among details—the specificities of how localities access and provision resources and opportunities and how various kinds of articulation can be built among them.

While it is critical to continue to mobilize residents and municipal institutions to support residential and economic settings that have long provided affordable and effective contexts for the intersections of intensely heterogeneous backgrounds, built environments, and ways of life, it is also important to find ways of redescribing the mass production of new residential settings where more and more residents are resituated.

Here, what appears to be the warehousing of the poor or the aspirant middle class in cheaply built high-rise tower blocks may indeed mark the wearing away of long-honed relational skills and social economies. But it also may harbor the incipient formations of a process of translation, where certain details of past residential configurations are reworked in new forms. Many of my friends have willingly bought or rent small apartments in these complexes. I would ingenuously ask them: "How can you live in a place like this?" They often point out the possibilities of different forms of collective life, more provisional, perhaps ephemeral, but with a strong sense of possibility, and not predicated on "going it alone" but on working out continuously mutable forms of interchange and interventions, with a commitment to using the apparently untenable as a means of rediscovering what it means to "go against the grain." If we only pay attention to the rollout of contemporary spatial products as exemplars of urban neoliberalism, we might miss opportunities to see something else taking place, vulnerable and provisional though it may be.

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