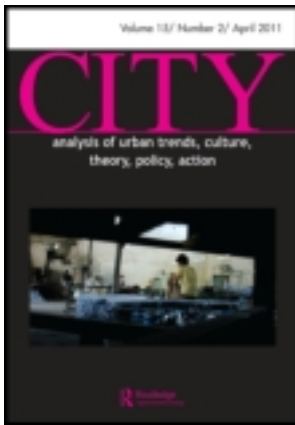


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The surfacing of urban life

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The surfacing of urban life

A response to Colin McFarlane and Neil Brenner, David Madden and David Wachsmuth

AbdouMaliq Simone

The apparently constitutive structures of urban life and its surfaces are assembled in complex relationships of mutual implication and divergence that envision and stabilize urban life into vastly uneven patterns of capacity. Still, the built and social forms that urban dwellers rely upon to recognize and operate with this unevenness constantly intersected in ways that generate constant yet provisional spaces and times of experimentation of uncertain but actual effect and reach. Specific locations come to inhabit conditions, constraints and possibilities which are at one and the same time both the same and different. This process is demonstrated here in terms of one of Southeast Asia's largest markets.

Key words: surface, market, assemblage, urban structure, periphery, Jakarta

Urbanization has been with us—and we with it—for so long, and has occasioned so much wonder and alarm, as well as the exigency to ‘do something about it’, that theoretical formulations about the urban often seem superfluous. Urbanization will either kill us through being unsustainable or save us through its intensive synergies. Thus, the importance of this ‘call–response’ between McFarlane and Brenner *et al.* rests not so much with the debate over the ontological status of assemblages but with the attempts to grapple with notions of urban life itself. Does the urban have a ‘life of its own’ and at a planetary scale? Is it the conrescence of differentiated investments and struggles that materialize a world that is able to stabilize, for now, the ways people consider and deal with each other? Is it in Engin

Isin’s term (2007, p. 223), a ‘difference machine’ that ‘assembles, generates, distributes and differentiates’ specific constellations of people, groups and objects, and ‘elicits, interpellates, adjures and incites’ them.

Is urban life a constantly changing patchwork of materialities always giving rise to new possibilities and problems, always trying to gather the surrounds, compensating for both the unanticipated potentials and disasters it occasions, and as such, continuously alters the horizon of what we consider to be life? If the latter is the case, there is no direct correspondence between a process of urbanization and particular concrete instances of it. The city may be the familiar form, but it is also a ruse. Here, urban life is more a matter of what can be made relatable at any point in time; what can transverse

established notions of the ‘near and the far’ or the ‘here and the there’; mobilities that leave in their wake a fabric of uneven concentrations of capacity and opportunity. In landscapes of vast inequality, of enforced conjunctions and detachment—choreographed by a variegated capitalism—life is also something rigged together from whatever is at hand, without standards of longevity or integrity. The pieces may not fit or easily coincide, and there are frequent collisions, near misses and escapes.

Urbanization is not simply a context for the support or appropriation of specific lives as it is the plane upon which people—circling, touching, avoiding, attaching—come together, sometimes kicking and screaming, as an infrastructure. This is an infrastructure that meshes constantly changeable and sometimes expendable bodies. Urban existence, never pretty or efficient, rumbles onward as the provisionally stitched together, jiggled up intersections of bodies and materials upon which things are both moved and caught—a textured surface that speeds things up and slows them down, where the interruptions enable points of view, attentions, memories, condensations and dissipations of effort and association.

Given these questions of urban life, the impetus to think about assemblages as a modality through which the urban instantiates itself seems to reflect a desire to make more use, better use, of all that exists in urban life. In doing so, it seeks to ‘blow up’ the old dividing lines about sectors, scales and geographical divides that characterize most representations of the urban. It reflects recognition that there seems to be so much that takes place that isn’t seen or said, but yet exerts a force on all other acknowledged existences. This is more than a matter of bringing ‘marginal populations’ into the picture, or to affirm the agencies of other non-human actants. As Ranciere (2004) has written concerning the onset of ‘urban politics’, the city was the locus for the production of a people different from that which was seen or named; that the city was the

possibility of those who have ‘no part in anything’ to become ‘anyone at all’—that is, to come to the stage, to be visible as an ordinary life in the city.

Thus, what is to be made use of cannot carry with it a specific value in advance. Certainly, its emergence may be blocked, appropriated or marginalized by particular forms of power, but we cannot turn to that which is now to be recognized with fully formed notions about its value or meaning. This is why the notion of rights to the city—even in its efforts to include and equalize—is limited in that it tends to specify in advance the ‘city’ to which rights are to be granted. Whereas the acknowledgement of multiple realities—visible and invisible—means that the urban is always ‘slipping away’ from us, always also somewhere else than where we expect it to be.

People and materials that operate within any space actively or potentially can step in and out of different senses of what is required and possible, different performances and framing devices, different vertically layered strata of articulation, and different ways of paying attention and of being implicated in what is going on. As Stephen Read (2006) states, places are always on their way somewhere, with different reach and possibilities, and always transformed by what people, materials, technical and discursive instruments do in the passing. This doesn’t mean that people are always mobile, adaptable and flexible; it doesn’t mean that some people are not incessantly cornered or enclaved. These processes, too, are aspects of urbanization, part of the trajectory of oscillating movement through which a wide range of economic mobilities are hedged through the cordoning off of others. So as physical and political infrastructures stratify movement into different interactional possibilities, and steer people into specific densities and speeds, as well as open up weakly controlled reverberations, urban life makes itself known in various ways.

However, at the same time, why hasn’t all that does exist been able to generate a greater

heterogeneity to urban ‘development’? Why hasn’t that which could be used, or is used ‘under the radar’, been able to attain greater scope or efficacy? Pluralities among cities and urbanization processes certainly exist. However, much remains with stultifying similarity—for example, the fear of messiness, the self-built, the street, the convoluted and complex. For centuries, obsessions with order, legibility and straight lines have dominated imaginations about what the urban should accomplish. Human life has been situated in a context where it is continuously visualized as insufficient; or more precisely, where everything that life could be finds its visualization in the image of the urban yet the concrete realities of large numbers of urban residents are simultaneously represented as falling short. For example, no matter what the urban poor did, they were always to be considered the ‘urban poor’, as even their ‘accomplishments’ were to be registered not in their contributions to remaking notions of urban life itself but in their creative manipulation of dire circumstances.

If various actors, ways of seeing, walks of life, infrastructures and sentiments are viewed as an assemblage—existing in relationships of both autonomy and interdependence—how does one work with the work that they do? Clearly, it is important to chart out the mechanisms and forces that permit such intensities of association to occur. It is also important to chart the trajectories through which such intense relations are disentangled, where various bodies, things, materials and spaces are kept apart through various spatial, discursive, economic disaggregation and segregation. Such a ‘context of contexts’ is a critical dimension of any ability to understand how cities are articulated to each other and now, more importantly, how the various polyvalent scalar arrangements through which urbanization operate becomes a ‘world’. At the same time, detailed inquiries are also necessary in terms of determining just how fully ‘enrolled’ specific activities, persons and practices are within the predominant logics

of capital accumulation. In other words, while we can affirm the pervasive structuring effects of capital, and the ways in which its adaptations and intersections with various resistant struggles compel the incessant remaking of value for all that exists—through commodification and dispossession—it is not always clear how fully encapsulated specific sites and practices of urbanization are within these manoeuvres.

If urbanization also entails the ever thickening and indeterminate intersections of bodies, materials, spaces and things, then even as they exist with particular values, abilities and potentials within the dominant logic of capital, their enactment—their very ability to perform for capital—brings with them virtual potentialities and concrete histories of unanticipated, if nevertheless, ‘shut-down’ meanings of what they could be and are, no matter the extensiveness of control (Virno, 2004). If capital itself depends upon a capacity to graft itself onto a wide range of practices and situations, without necessarily specifying all of the terms of their inclusion—and if it indeed expands by working through various modalities of making, collaborating and inhabiting that it does not necessarily control as the very possibility of penetrating more extensively across differentiated social, physical and mental landscapes—then it is important to explore those interstices of any conjunction of what is otherwise subsumed. It is important in order to discern trajectories of manoeuvre that pull urbanization across mediations that slow down the totalizing aggrandizements.

In this way, the urban takes all kinds of forms because it can operate between the double articulation that Deleuze and Guattari (1980) refer to in their discussion of assemblages (*agencement*). In other words, between the possible—the unstable flows of materials and substances—and the prescribed—the imposition of functional, stable structures that secure a statistical order to their relationships—between code and singularity, expression and content. Assemblages not only open up new exteriorities or

capitalize on well-rehearsed, deep-seated practices, but also create multiple surfaces of exposure and articulation. Here, surface exists as a vehicle of mobility and circulation—it entails conduits, relays and switches. It is that dimension of urban space which folds a specific line of inside and outside, but a line that is permeable and oscillating, that is full of leaks and transmissions, yet sustains a sense of interior—a moment when specific things are seen or felt as belonging to each other in a place that is provisionally its own scene, stage, coherent ‘district’ or ‘domain’, but which can also be articulated to many other scenes or stages. While any surface is situated somewhere—with a history, with overlays and sediments of power and appropriation—it also doesn’t belong anywhere in specific. It is situated between a particular substance of relations and a range of technical devices—such as coding systems—with their own algorithmic rules. Surfaces are always being built and erased; they need not emerge from the depths of a people’s history.

For example, in scores of mixed income districts across the world, a given street may have a plurality of different plot sizes, land consolidation, uses of construction materials—no building looks the same, none is built in the same way. While this surface may have been produced from particular economic conditions and cultural practices, its existence as a surface is not dependent upon them; it operates as its own series of relays, channels, circuits that instantiate particular points of view, ways of doing things and convictions among those who operate across this surface. Of course, surfaces are also the commodities of contemporary capitalist urbanization—with its array of homogenizing built environments.

As one crosses the contemporary megacity region—a region full of contested histories, full of intersecting vectors of use, demand, value and control—there is also a seemingly arbitrary arrangement of built environments, of ascendancy, renewal, ruin, erasure and mixture in densely proximate relationships.

Without systematic examination of cadastrals and demographic profiles, it is nearly impossible to piece together a functional prospective reading of what is likely to happen. Failed and new projects exist side by side, some even replacing the other—for example, new developments replacing failed developments without any discernible difference in their appearance; high end mixed use commercial and residential mega-structures sit side by side, one with full occupancy, the other struggling to fill even half of the available space. Seemingly dynamic mixed use and social class neighbourhoods reach quick ‘tipping points’ and virtually disappear overnight, while contiguous districts, much more problematic in their economic and social histories, continue to hang on, even thrive.

Here, it is uncertain what contiguities in place actually mean. What does it mean for particular kinds of built and social environments to be ‘next to each other’, enjoined in a common designation of being part of the same city or urban region? Of course, there are discernible trends detectable by the normative devices of ground rent, as well as cycles of creative destructive and regeneration. Still, the multiplicity of events, components and places sometimes do not easily hang together; they are not apparently assembled into a dynamic machinic function. Although political economy can provide a framework for understanding this intensified sense of disjunction, it is possible that the apparent disjunction itself obscures some form of distributed agency at work.

When a multiplicity of domains seem to have nothing to do with each other, and thus create the image of individuated autonomy obviating the usual functions that proximity might otherwise bring, that apparent autonomy in itself leaves open the possibility for various forms of ‘trespassing’—that is, ways in which both intended and unintended uses of particular infrastructure or institutions can take place simultaneously. Thus, what can be recognized as an assemblage and what cannot; what operates in concert, in complicity, at cross-purposes, in sequence,

in sickness and in health? The vast peripheries, with their new factories that come and go, with their agricultural plots that come and go, with their dense agglomerations of people that sometimes act like the city we know and sometimes not; the messy lines where the warehousing of poor expelled from other parts of the city cross the ambitions of suburban towns to become major urban centres which, in turn, cross the entrepreneurial juggernaut in search of cheap land for back offices, warehouses and polluting industries which, in turn, cross the lines of flight of the elite—all represent the tentativeness of urbanization, a new form of trying to keep the mess away from the resplendent skylines. What will these jumbles make out of each other; what kinds of specific municipal politics are at work to ‘space-out’ discordant functions and populations?

These surfaces, on the one hand, can be maintained in a typical array of exploitation and marginalization. Wages are kept low,

residents are kept scrambling for one provisional economic advantage after another, parochial social ascriptions are continuously reproduced to preclude mass mobilizations, and residents learn to rely upon their own wits rather than make sustained demands for a better life. These surfaces regulate relationships with various forms of control, most particularly with that of the state—the state that registers, surveys, accounts, disburses and accords a range of various right and responsibilities. However, there are other surfaces as well. There are those that face inside to a particular enfolding of populations and space—not necessarily communities or administrative districts—but zones of a felt commonality or shared past and present. Across these surfaces different kinds of affective and material economies are performed. Whereas predominant forms of regulation may compel residents to provide ‘accounts’ of themselves and to be accountable in terms of their management



Figure 1 Waiting for transport outside Tanah Abang Market, Jakarta.

of households, expenditures, proclivities and associations, the ways in which residents and workers deal with each other is full of deals—that is, constantly remade accommodations and collaborations seldom based on strict notions of eligibility or social status; reciprocities of all kinds without the necessary incurring of obligations. Constellations of actors that worked together yesterday may not do so tomorrow, or may indeed repeat their cooperation day after day; decisions, repairs and innovations may be exercised by a changing cast of characters as no one particular function is the purview of a specific individual, status or territory.

The critical thing to keep in mind is that these surfaces—one which is turned toward the regulatory, extractive functions of the city and the other that exists as a plane upon which cityness can be rehearsed by

inhabitants no matter their situation—exist simultaneously, as a strip of intertwined atmospheres. What then becomes visible? How is it the multiple realities seem to coexist—some seen, acknowledged, depicted as real and others, hardly there, if at all. What operates within and across assemblages that determine this visibility? Within prevailing trajectories of urban power, is visibility always a critical resource; do the processes that render things visible also threaten the very existence of that which exists outside of view?

It is difficult to address these questions in general. While it is valuable to focus on the otherwise marginalized dimensions of the city in the way, for example, McFarlane addresses the practices through which the poor concretely inhabit the city, perhaps it is important also to re-look at those



Figure 2 Scene from the floor an Tanah Abang Market, Jakarta.



Figure 3 Neighbourhood extension of Tanah Abang Market.

domains that are highly visible. For example, Tanah Abang in central Jakarta is one of the world's largest textile and clothing wholesale and retail markets (Figures 1–5). It is officially the purview of municipal administration which in turn contracts its management to the city's largest property developer. This developer in turn subcontracts the daily management of the market's operations to a designated company formed for just this purpose. The company then largely relies upon the coordination of scores of unofficial groupings that are responsible for specific sectors, such as parking, transport, shipping, security, cleaning, leasing space and fee collection. This coordination comes from a shifting committee of fixers, dealers, enforcers and negotiators that work at the junctures of activities and spaces.

At the top, on the part of the municipality and the developer, there is little idea about how the market is actually run. Even in the

actual transactions themselves, the configuration of bundles or baskets of goods—the volume of items bought and sold—is the product of scores of different sellers who contribute varying amounts to these bundles at different times. While there are 10,000 wholesale and retail units in the market—each with their own identity, obligations and goods—the vast majority exist as constantly shifting parts of larger constellations that actually 'manage' a given sale. This does not obviate the fact that anyone can go to a stall and purchase items, but rather that most of the volume of goods transacted stem from various collaborations among individuated sellers so that consumers—who also largely represent the potential purchases of scores of others—might both have access to the reduced price that volume permits *and* manage highly differentiated relationships among various networks of sellers within the market.

It is true that a small number of Indonesian Chinese entrepreneurs control the market—if



Figure 4 Re-bundling merchandise, Tanah Abang Market.

by control, one means the ability to regulate the large-scale importation of commodities, maintain highly favourable relationships with government officials that enable the circumvention of particular duties and taxes, and to have access to capital for investment, pay-offs and business consolidation. At the same time, such control is also expensive and limiting. It means retaining responsibility for labour, marketing, space and services that usually require uniform practices and consistent, year round outlays of expenditures. Profitability of the market depends upon its continuous penetration across diverse spaces, consumers, times, needs and capacities. It requires various surfaces of exposure and access, and this is best accomplished through enfolded into the market a wide range of production and retailing practices. Some 300,000 people use the market

every day and double this number depends on the market for their livelihood. This includes the thousands of small enterprises across Jakarta that produce jeans, Islamic dress, undergarments, batiks, accessories and children's clothing for the market, the transporters, repairers and brokers associated with getting the goods to the market and to particular consumer destinations.

It is also difficult to ascertain where the market begins and ends, as entire surrounding neighbourhoods have become extensions with their own niche products, prices and conditions; hundreds of office and residential spaces have been converted into warehouses. The turnover of Tanah Abang exceeds that of all of the other 125 shopping malls in the city combined. The market clearly represents forms of commodification and exchange value; the vectors of profitability clearly are skewed toward those able to navigate the intersections of the market with larger structures of political and economic power. Coalitions of politicians and top entrepreneurs could probably put an end to the market if they decided to do so. The market is a place to make money and because it continues to make money its inefficiencies and autonomies are not predominant matters of concern.

Yet how the market operates—what takes place there, what gets done and accomplished there is not completely the purview of either a capitalist logic or the domination of its ruling class. Its efficacy requires less imposition of a given form or practice than an incessant process of give and take; it seeks to have some kind of traction in lives that otherwise would not be captivated by it, but who, nevertheless, make implicit demands upon it as a criteria for their affiliation. In the process, skills, decisions, ways of thinking and doing things are rehearsed which are transplanted into other domains—particularly in the form of collaborations and, as Isabelle Stengers (2010) puts it, hesitations—that is, a way of modulating time so that other dimensions of interactions between people outside of the pursuit of normative behaviour



Figure 5 Working out the details of a pieced together wholesale deal, Tanah Abang Market.

or self-interest have time to rehearse themselves, time to yield even tentative results.

Decisions on trading practices, on who can sell what in what particular part of a market that has no clearly fixed boundaries is a matter of interweaving different times of the year, with changing compositions of sellers and buyers and producers and with differing calibrations of advantage and disadvantage. There are multiple surfaces to all that takes place within it. There are surfaces of compliance, of orderly distributions of space, opportunity and costs, of obeisance to formal authority and surfaces of continuous rehearsal. Here, the market becomes an occasion to reiterate memories of association and to provisionally explore new ones; where the buying and selling is the mechanism and incentive to chart out transactions and affiliations that ‘shift things around’—materials, opportunities, connections, information, affects—that provide a critical supplement to people’s urban lives.

Much of these surfaces exist in ‘plain view’; there are no deep secrets to penetrate, no underneath to get at. However, their accessibility depends upon more than what one is looking for; more than how one moves across the events and actions of the market. The vast majority of the 1 million who depend on this market struggle to make ends meet. The costs of affiliation are high; the stalls don’t come cheap; the hours are long and the earnings sufficient only to keep one’s head above water. Most want a life more full of opportunities and products, and to feel that they are moving up the ladder. However, they also know that this is a city where you are increasingly responsible for yourself, you can’t go it alone, and that to work in association with others requires risks, and that there are few maps to navigate them. To get things done means not relying upon one way of doing them, and this takes practice, as well as routes of conjunction

and those of flight. Therefore, Tanah Abang is full of surfaces—exposures, folds, hooks, relays, hinges, soldering and shifting parts. They are simultaneously ‘in’ the market and outside.

To address the critical questions of assemblages it is necessary to look more at places like markets—as well as ports, municipal administrations, bus terminals, ‘offshore’ industrial plants, back office processing zones, large-scale low-income and middle-class housing developments and universities—as domains where politics, culture, economy and technique are potentially folded in many different ways and as sites of possibility to take urbanization in different directions. As in Tanah Abang, it is also the willingness to be moved, to be enfolded into something where your own sense of what life is and what your interests are have to be assembled elsewhere.

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