

Ghostly Cracks and Urban Deceptions: Jakarta

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Conundrums of Discernment

In China Miéville's *The City and the City*, Beszel and Ul Qoma are two cities existing in the same physical space—thoroughly imbricated and entangled—but whose residents are not allowed to see this fact or say anything about it.¹ Each city has its own infrastructure, dialing codes, and regime. The impetus for the city—as a locus of integration, order, and measured distribution—dissipates. In conventional wisdom across many cultures, the city was the place of discourse, comparison, and coherence; while the *bush* remained the domain of primordial attachments, spirits, and fascinations. In Miéville's novel, the distinctions remain but are no longer “spaced out,” given their “appropriate space.” Thus each term takes on a ghostly character; the inhabitants sense the presence of the other but cannot take in both of them in any clear-cut, simultaneous apprehension. As many African urban residents are fond of saying, urban life is returning to the *bush*—a place of inhabitation where humans are not in charge and engage only reluctantly for the powers of description, accounting, and predictability face their horizon there.

The critical question, to which this essay gestures, is how the city now operates in the transformation of life—in the relationships among people, things, animals, spaces, language, and movement. Does the city constitute a world where matters still are to be continuously worked out in deliberations among various positions, views, histories, and aspirations? Not that an ideal is posited to which the murky and rambunctious realities of urban life are to be judged or molded into, but as a world of constant rehearsal and revision, improvisation and experimentation, planning and anticipation. It considers the incompleteness of the city—its seeming contradictions, opacity, and erratic energies—as a critical condition for urban life.

Urban life seems to increasingly be 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. As such, 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.

Some contemporary urban thinkers conclude that within this uneven landscape, a process of planetary urbanization substantially diminishes the

conceptual salience of the city, as it no longer constitutes the exemplar of processes of articulation and intersection.²

As one crosses contemporary megacity regions full of contested histories and intersecting vectors of use, demand, value, and control, built environments seem arbitrarily arranged into mixtures of ascendancy, renewal, ruin, and erasure in densely proximate relationships. Without systematic examination of cadastral 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 megastructures sit side by side, one with full occupancy, the other struggling to fill even half of the available space. Seemingly dynamic mixed-use and varied social class neighborhoods 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, one just gives up trying to figure out 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? 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.³ 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 the poor expelled from other parts of the city cross the ambitions of suburban towns to become major urban centers that, in turn, cross the entrepreneurial juggernaut in search of cheap land for back-offices, warehouses, and polluting industries that, 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 downtown 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?

This complexion, if it is even largely recognized at all, would seem to feed into the general state of alarm about the sustainability of cities. For some areas these questions are matters of ecological impacts that exert deleterious effects over wide basins of resources needed to keep urban populations afloat. In others these questions concern massive population expansion without the requisite economic and environmental underpinnings to support it. Water systems are thoroughly compromised, flooding a near-constant feature of the urban environment, and gridlocked traffic brings the circulation of bodies and goods to a halt. These are matters of urgent

concern. In most large urban systems today, there are few linkages between ecosystem services, infrastructure investment, spatial planning, and economic growth, resulting in conventional approaches that will become economically counterproductive as the costs of oil, water, waste management, and food supplies start rising faster than inflation. The possibilities of coordination among these sectors are impeded by limited data sets and methodologies for interrelating available data.⁴

Even within given sectors, such as the urban land market, there are few institutionalized processes for interrelating land valuation, land use status, concession fees, registration mechanisms, and mortgage structures. Infrastructure management is constrained by the lack of life-cycle costing, particularly in terms of optimizing capital and operating costs, ensuring adequate cash flows over the long term, and assessing the life expectancies and rates of deterioration for a particular asset. Providers and regulators often have a limited sense of the economy of resource flows within service regions. There needs to be a better ability to track resource flows from household to city levels and provide an important picture of where water, for example, comes from, how it is used, in what amounts, how it circulates, and where it ends up.⁵

At the same time, these concerns reiterate the ways in which urban thought has been conventionally characterized by a limited number of “fixations.” One is the need to fix complex urbanizing processes to a limited number of investigative methods, theoretical considerations, and interpretive frameworks. The second is the compulsion to “fix” things, to see the city as something in need of specific kinds of interventions and regulations as opposed to a multifaceted resource. The inability to fully use the city as a resource for understanding life and its potentials has much to do with the tendency to fix urban thought to a narrow range of questions and problems. But without an appreciation of the complex social dynamics underpinning such problems, the technical and policy discourses that are mobilized to address them inevitably have limited value. The third notion

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is the way in which city life often seems “fixed”—as in the “fix is on”—that all of the synergies potentiated by urban life don’t really amount to much because the game has been fixed in advance. The city goes through the motions of being as cosmopolitan, democratic, and dream-fulfilling as it is cracked up to be, but in the end the disposition and value has already been determined.

As the production of urban knowledge has largely been evaluated according to its applicability to fix different problems, it has paid insufficient attention to ways in which cities are the sites of specific collaborations between the economic and political powers. These collaborations largely define what it is possible to do in cities given their domination of available resources and institutional capacities. Based on their capture of government and media, these collaborations define the urban problems that require fixing, and they then fix the attention of research institutions, agencies, and government on these problems as the primary features of cities. What then goes unnoticed are the efforts on the part of urban majorities—their own particular collaborations, livelihood practices, and imaginations to make visible other dimensions of urban life and how they intersect with those facets that have been designated as problems. It may be clear that environmental conditions, infrastructure deficits, and unjust and inefficient governance have a detrimental impact on urban life for everyone. But the capacities of cities to deal with them are impeded by the very fact that these problems tend to dominate our considerations of urban life. By not paying attention to the vast range of practices, local economies, cultural styles, experiments, and sheer efforts that residents make on a day to day basis to engage and use the city, it is unlikely that these problems will really be addressed.

Proliferating Phantoms and Ephemeral Majorities

Life of course isn’t all that it is cracked up to be. The fissures and interruptions, the wounds and traumas, the categories and designations all attempt to hold life for the possibilities of some apprehension. But there is always

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something that exceeds these moments and devices. The markings and operations exerted upon matters themselves construct the visualization of leakage and porosity, as things seep into each other, creating contamination and infection. At one time in modern urban histories it was important to concretely delineate where things came from—how water arrived at particular outlets, how food appeared at particular tables, how power was transmitted from here to there. Then the visualization of reticulation was initially submerged, as infrastructures of urban service delivery were put out of view, and then supplemented with the omnipresence of monitoring and accounting, as well as the digital characteristics of communication transmissions and operating systems.⁶ The weighty corporality of the city disappears into a vast opacity, and once again, the ghosts that were always suspected of governing the city are in charge. This time, however, the trees, water towers, pipelines, and scattered green fields that conventionally harbored them are removed in favor of new optics and relays.

At the same time, the processes where cities are contorted, stretched, ignored, sliced and diced, and crazy-glued leave many phantoms in their wake. There are things that appear to be institutions, markets, communities, and sectors but no longer function as the conventional procedures of their discernment would have it. In many places across cities of the so-called majority world, for example, markets continue to operate as a domain for the buying and selling of goods, but this activity operates more as a veneer for transactions of other kinds—ephemeral, spiritual, occulted, and political—often all at the same time. In every city in Africa or Asia I have ever worked in or visited, markets have been subject to “mysterious” fires. While there may be quite apparent reasons why particular regimes might want to break the back of local traders, these burnings always provide testament to a certain power that exceeds the strictly economic. Not dissimilarly, large bureaucracies may be full of workers, agendas, established practices, chains of command, monitoring, and evaluation—but the “real” work takes place elsewhere, or not at all. But it doesn’t seem

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to matter, as the institutions continue to plod along as if no real mission were required. Even as neoliberal structural adjustment has eliminated many of these bureaucracies, cities remain full of fully equipped office suites, holding companies, and consultancies whose functions seem impossible to figure out. Perhaps the greatest phantom of them all is the majority of inhabitants themselves.

Throughout global convocations on urban issues during the past several decades, the mantra has been that “cities belong to their inhabitants.” This worthy phrase was intended to promote greater inclusiveness in terms of urban planning and governance; reflect that the city just doesn’t work and is not sustainable if its resources, spaces, and opportunities are dominated by the few; and assert that there are no urban futures without maximizing the inclusion of inhabitants. The problem seems to be that our collective knowledge of these inhabitants is quite diminished. Substantial attention has been placed, and thus knowledge garnered, on the urban poor—itsself a highly murky and contested designation—and those residents whose access to various media gives them opportunities to represent themselves. A transnational urban public sphere of educated, lifestyled cosmopolitans has provided reassurance that the trajectories of urban change are moving in a similar direction no matter the city’s location or macro-structural embedding. The cultivation of both the object of urban poverty and a transnational or globally outlooked elite provides the occasion for mutual recognition among cities across disparate national contexts.⁷ When cities thus regard each other, as the exigencies of economic growth require them to do, they can see in each other sufficient similarities so that the critical economic actors and sectors have the confidence that acting in the other place is like acting at “home.”

Additionally, conventional forms of address—those to whom policies and rights are targeted—exist within a multiplicity of forms of address and designation. Justice, rights, and opportunities can be addressed to a specific group with specific conditions and senses of themselves. But this is not where the action tends to be. Various forms of media, branding, scrutiny, and provisioning are no longer defined by a specific set of external coordinates. Populations that are recipients of consideration and communications of all kinds are not defined by individuals or communities. The masses are not specific social classes, but more generalized dynamics that take over when all the attributes and qualities of references are taken away from a large number of people.⁸ Individuals are not coherent entities but shifting fields of probable actions, data sets, risk calculations, credit ratings, genetic profiles, and shifting lifestyles. Populations are less defined by stable, differentiated attributes through which relative inequities can be measured than by the nature of their convertibility and interoperability—the capacity of a population to compose and decompose, to become different things at different times.⁹ As such, residents of cities are enfolded into variegated spatializations of scrutiny, consumption, maneuver, and regulation that

are brought forth through various forms of social mediation, branding, tracking systems, and networks. When we talk then about inhabitants and the rights appropriate to them, there is a large amount of ambiguity as to who we are talking to, and who feels affected, and what kinds of senses are at work to perceive what is equitable or not.

While large swathes of commonality undoubtedly exist among industrial and service workers, petty entrepreneurs and commerçants, civil servants and bureaucrats, police, teachers, health-care workers, and drivers, these lines of connection remain largely implicit. Aspirations to middle-class household organization and consumption patterns, moves to suburban single-pavilion residences or apartment blocks, are just assumed to be the norm. There is of course substantial evidence of these trajectories—that is, movement away from labor-intensive management of urban residency in older, more central, highly dense parts of the city that have become increasingly expensive given the competition for land and services. At the same time, large portions of cities, particularly in the majority world still are characterized and replenished by dense mixtures of various residential histories, income groups, occupations, outlooks, and ways of doing things. The intent is not to proffer this continuity as some kind of counter-evidence—for indeed the pressures of accessing safe, halfway decently serviced and affordable living spaces are intense across the global urban world. This movement, as it is characterized by a more discernible spacing out of residential patterns, cadastral registrations, the taking on of mortgage debt, and subjection overall to more comprehensive mechanisms of accountability, does produce a kind of urban knowledge about these residents that previously was only partial. At the same time, sufficient numbers of inhabitants—and many new arrivals to particular cities—continue to operate under very partial surveillance. Civil servants may continue to report to work and perform often shrinking duties, but enter into shifting collaborations with others on a wide range of income-earning projects. Many residents constantly circulate through various jobs, not to collect larger or more secure salaries but to have access to

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different social networks thought to increase various opportunities. In other words, there are large numbers of urban residents, not poor, middle class, or rich—who may indeed on the surface look to be included in such categorizations—but who are putting together livelihoods that remain “off the map.”

Dis-appointing Politics

As a locus of aspiration, the city was to be the place where people could change their lives, leaving behind the strictures of claustrophobic accountability and obligations. The haunting of guilt and ancestors, the pull of the land, and the anchorage of individuals within ecologies of seasons, crops, and spirits could be dispensed with in favor of a more systematic, rational formula of self-design and the shared benefits of public life and urban citizenship. As there were perhaps few real instantiations of such an ideal, the imagery of citizenship was to be more a matter of accords and deals. The city had to be made sufficiently liveable—in terms of the salubrious, industrious, the moral, and the consent to be governed—for its profitability to work.¹⁰ In opting for a more “civilized” existence, those inhabiting the city also were more inclined to leave “civilization” behind as well, as the capacity to fight and disrupt could also be intense. The irony here is that the evidence for the scope of such transformations of human possibility inherent in the modern ideal of the city may largely come from that section of the urban population that we know little about—a kind of phantom majority.

Of course these potentials of urban democracy were always based fundamentally on “nothing.” As Jacques Rancière 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; 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.¹¹ For all of the apparent exigency of maximizing the capacity of inhabitants to be involved in planning and decisions regarding the sustainability of cities, it is important to at least wonder what the implications would be for bringing

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this phantom majority into account. While the ghost-like conditions and practices by which it seems to constantly renew the city as a nexus of collaborations and circulations of all kinds, is this mode of operation sufficient to ensure its own future? Of course this is a question impossible from the start, as again, if we take this aspect of urban life as a kind of “bush,” then predictability vanishes, and so too this residue of cityness itself.

As Ackbar Abbas puts it, urban politics is a politics of dis-appointment—about the “not there” in what is there, or perhaps more that of dis-appointing—of being transported to a place you didn’t think you were at.¹² So all of the effort that urban majorities in the so-called postcolonial urban world have made disentangling and individuating themselves to become eligible for different inclusions, access, participation, security, and accumulation often produces a sense of dissipation—a sense that “this is nowhere” and that it is too late to do anything about it. All of the investments in property, education, and legibility have just gotten people deeper in debt, further from the where the economic action is, more isolated, more insecure. At the same time, all of the efforts that residents may make to compensate for having a job that doesn’t pay enough, for incrementally building livelihoods and living spaces over time, for honing highly adept strategies for working with others to increase their exposure to opportunities and the larger world may suddenly fall apart as well.

To ward off disappointment then requires various tactics of hedging and arbitrage—of playing with and against the differences of possible outcomes, of showing various faces and facets of oneself to different audiences on different occasions. It is important not to stay still. Even if you don’t have a lot of money or time or opportunities for mobility, the exigency is to construct some sense of movement, even if you don’t actually change physical locations. This is what an incremental urbanism actually refers to—not the elaboration of a coherent plan in a series of steps, but the demonstration of a willingness to conjoin, adapt, work around or in relationship to the experimental maneuvers of others—whether these maneuvers concern entrepreneurship, construction, or service provision.

The incremental is deployed as an exploratory device to see what opportunities or directions it might open up. Instead of committing resources and efforts to the realization of a “complete” project, these increments are instantiated to elicit particular kinds of attention and recognition. Residences may be added onto or altered, small financial investments may be made in selling items in front of the house or in a wide range of other commercial ventures, and investments of time and effort may be made in running various social welfare or political programs as a means of testing waters, indicating that someone is “on their way” somewhere or available for subsequent investments. The interest in eliciting attention and recognition is not so much to issue a signal that one has “arrived” at a particular status or destination but rather to make “something” happen without a clear notion

about what will happen as a result. The point is not so much to consolidate a position that then has to be defended but to communicate that movement is under way as well as to launch a vehicle through which an individual or household can move.

Conversions of Movement

This notion of movement can also be seen in practices of managing certain urban locales. Take a district like Kramat Sentiong in central Jakarta, one of the oldest residential areas of the city, tightly compacted with mixtures of old and new residents and an exploding youth population desperate for work. The district is composed of residents from many different ethnic/regional groups—East Java, Batak, Padang, Madura, Makassar, Sundanese. These groupings are associated with specific occupations—some reflecting long-term colonial histories where certain groups were availed opportunities in particular sectors, others extending back even further in time according to histories of trade and circulation. The kinds of behaviors cultivated through long-term involvement in particular jobs is associated to ethnicities regardless of whether individuals are directly involved in them. Thus there is a sense that people know each other—there are few secrets, no surprises; residents feel that it is easy to get a handle on what is going on because they fundamentally know each other. Ethnic identity provides an anchorage, a ready-made device of solidarity capable of delimiting one's responsibilities and attention.

But a significant part of the power of this categorization is that it is able to obscure the many moments when it is suspended. In a district where the traditional ethnic occupations no longer are able to absorb more than a fraction of the available labor pool, where the shape and deployment of these occupations must continuously be revised to remain viable given shifts in how things are produced and the locations of production, and where competition for opportunities intensifies, it is the ability to intersect often discrepant skills, places, and backgrounds that provides the competitive edge and opens up new ways of making and doing things. Given the fact that residents living in dense proximity to one another come to witness the implications of many different kinds of transactions, they are able to discern patterns of exchange, antagonism, indifference, and cooperation beyond the "fixed" knowledge of apparent social stratifications. With a plurality of such transactions there is no need to feel implicated by any one in particular, and thus a certain confidence can be accorded more risk-laden, experimental collaborations with others. These don't come naturally or as a by-product of sheer heterogeneity alone, but rather as a matter of continuous rehearsal.

With so many different backgrounds, aspirations, or different ways of trying to pursue agendas that are basically similar among a diverse population, there is a great deal of wear and tear on districts like Kramat Sentiong.

Repairs and changes are piecemeal, often jiggled together out of whatever materials and labor people have at hand. Many efforts come to nothing, leaving a residue of failure that must be compensated for. Set amid an aging infrastructure of roads, pipes, and lines badly maintained by municipal government, there are always things breaking down and vulnerabilities exposed. The need to constantly repair, then, provides a context for rehearsing different ways for residents to interact. Co-residents who might otherwise leave each other alone come together to fix a broken pipe, repair the leaky roof of a local mosque, create a recreational space from an abandoned plot, or access rice from a market at the other end of the city that has an advantageous price. Working on things that go wrong or working together to seize momentary opportunities becomes a rehearsal for the construction of work. It is in these rehearsals that one finds the genealogy of new enterprises, schemes, and investments that open up the possibilities of expanding work. It is here also where important interchanges between social and built environments also take place.

Original land allotments have been variously divided, and even when certain forms of regularization appeared—in terms of standardizing plot size and the initial structure built on it—a great deal of variety has ensued. The structures that line a street or lane rarely look the same, and this dissimilarity reflects real stories of oscillating accumulation and loss, of divergent calculations about how to deploy resources, and ways of working out balances between the use of housing as a place of accommodation and business. New multistory constructions coexist with those that have been barely altered for decades; different uses of materials and surfaces reflect not only what can be afforded financially but also what can be afforded as a demonstration to others about household capacities, willingness, and value. That a district can exhibit such a plurality of buildings conveys its ability to absorb a wide range of effort and initiative.

Conversely, for this intensified differentiation of the built environment to occur there must be a willingness to extricate particular things and

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materials from conventional uses. Things sometimes must just operate at the surface. Objects must be converted into functions and locations to which they are unfamiliar, and this stems from a process where people are able to see differently—that is, anticipate the realization of a project through assembling bits and pieces of things that don't seem to belong, that may seem out of place. Here the play of surfaces, the interaction of discrepant materials and images, connotes the possibility of a synchronous collective action momentarily freed from history. Even as the bits and pieces and the participants may carry their own histories with them and exert them in any subsequent assemblage, the surface doesn't belong anywhere in particular. It is situated between a specific substance of relations and a range of technical devices—such as coding systems—with their own algorithmic rules. Surfaces are always built and erased; they need not emerge from the depths of a people's history.

Whereas ethnic solidarities may provide the consistency and support to persist through the ups and downs of everyday urban life, residents know that whatever stability they may piece together is affected by the actions of close and distant actors, that security is not a matter of defending or consolidating particular gains or expertise. Rather, it is derived from broadening the possible implications and scope of whatever one is presently doing to make it lead to new paths, new capacities to act in different domains. When one examines household networks in Kramat Sentiong, there is a typical mixture of long-lasting affiliations—usually family and ethnically based—and relatively short-term collaborations, often with residents, not usually in the immediate neighborhood, but in other parts of a shared district. These collaborations are often risk laden. They are not undertaken as the product of careful deliberation but are more opportunistic, sometimes impulsive, and based on an anticipation that something can come quickly from them. They constitute what Allan Stoekl in his book on Bataille calls “exposures without guarantees”—that is, an ethics of bodily effects that does not lead to some higher goal or utility.¹³ These are expenditures that go beyond the closed economy of self-satisfaction or social sustainability.

The expectations are usually modest and involve the desire to gain access to a part of the city, or a sector, or an institution that otherwise the individual would not have access to. There is a different expectation from time, as investments in these collaborations attempt to attenuate substantial obligations as well as minimize the costs of wasted time or money. Importantly, they are undertaken with the sense not of solidifying a business or social project but of putting together a platform from which individuals can move on, keep moving. So while some residents may stay in the same job and live in the same house or neighborhood for most of their lives, they can still effect a sense of movement, of transforming their situation into something else than it was, even when things on the surface might not appear

to change. Movement takes place, but often with limited visibility—the ways in which ghosts have long been accustomed to travel.

Urban life then is not what it seems to be. The city itself becomes a form of deception. As such, what kind of knowing is required to engage such deception? Taking from David T. Goldberg's notions of an epistemology of deception: the city gives rise to new aberrant forms—for example, anamorphoses, anachronisms, and catachresis.¹⁴ The norms relied upon to know urban life morph into something else. Paying attention to all of these aberrant forms—the proliferating twists, bends, and warps of urban life—then becomes a kind of deception, a cover-up for the fact that the city has already fundamentally become something other than what we thought it was. How can one work through the notion of city as deception to discover what the city has become—or if it even continues to exist? To what extent is deception used heuristically, in the myriad of tactics, complicities, accommodations, fascinations, conflicts, tricks, and evasions deployed by the “majority” of residents to retain the postcolonial city as something “yet to be made”? To what extent is this possibility founded on the intensifying incompleteness of the urban in locales and discourses where everything seemed “wrapped up”—now finding cracks all over the place?

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