

## CRITICAL CITIES VOLUME 3: IDEAS, KNOWLEDGE AND AGITATION FROM EMERGING URBANISTS

Naik Deepa and Trenton Oldfield (Ed).

London: Myrdle Court Press, 2012, ISBN: 9780956353931

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Inequality is a matter of everyday life and cities are places where inequality is experienced more violently. As Deepa Naik and Trenton Oldfield argue, cities, particularly large metropolises are sites to generate and reproduce inequalities, a similar process seen in different parts of the world. They suggest this is a result of what they call the “urban industry”.<sup>1</sup> *Critical Cities Volume 3*—the third in a series published by “This Is Not a Gateway” (TINAG) platform—is an attempt to explore various urban inequalities. The editors, Naik Deepa and Trenton Oldfield, are actively involved in bringing forward various forms of inequalities related to cities. They formed the platform, which organizes the annual festival bringing together a wide variety of people working on and interested in urban issues. They also run Myrdle Court Press<sup>2</sup>, an independent publishing house, and organise “Salons” to discuss urban and spatial issues. In addition, Deepa Naik and Trenton Oldfield also advise various cultural and not-for-profit organisations, charities, private businesses, independent publishers and organises courses, produces articles for a range of publications, prepares lectures, and presents research findings at various conferences, festivals and similar events<sup>3</sup>.

This book comes out of the third TINAG festival which aimed to connect activists from all over the world concerned with various forms of urban inequality and examine the problems associated with urban regeneration particularly through finance and real estate

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<sup>1</sup> See their article titled *This is what activist and Boat Race disrupter Trenton Oldfield did next... published in the INDEPENDENT, 31 October 2014.* <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/this-is-what-activist-and-boat-race-disrupter-trenton-oldfield-did-next-9831575.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Home page at <http://myrdlecourtpress.net/bookshop.html>

<sup>3</sup> For more information see <http://www.thisisnotagateway.net/>.

sectors. The authors take us on a journey into the world of cities as diverse as Zagreb, London, New York, Bogota, Hong Kong and Beirut, all under the influence of a global culture of spectacle and consumerism reflected in sanitised spaces such as high-rises, gentrified neighbourhoods and 'Designated Public Places'. The book is divided into five chapters, each of which contains several articles written either by a single author or collectively by various authors. The first chapter "Introduction: City as Inequality" belongs to the editors who put forward the aims of the book by indicating the need for a more equal global society where people should override tyrannical regimes, seen in the latest uprisings in the Middle East. The editors demonstrate that the new social movements emerge in cities, where inequality is reproduced through mass rural-to-urban migration and urban densification (pp. 3-8). The second chapter, "Erase, stretch and relinquish" looks at the processes of late-capitalistic urban development and finance which are the two most important profit-generators bringing economic crisis of the late 2000s (p. 29). Each article looks at specific cases of Recife (Brazil), Hong Kong (China), London (the UK) and New York (the USA), New Belgrade (Serbia) and Zagreb (Croatia). While Recife and Hong Kong are depicted as the aggressor peripheries ready to demand and consume everything (pp. 38-68), London and New York are represented as the less-dynamic cities representing legacies of the past hegemony of the West (pp. 69-88). The other two articles discuss the post-socialist countries of Serbia and Croatia, which cannot propose a clear future for their residents due to their transition from socialism to neoliberal capitalism as well as the social turmoil caused by the war in former Yugoslavia (pp. 89-109).

The third chapter "Archipelago" looks at various landscapes where inequalities emerge, by giving examples from Hong Kong, Cyprus, and London. The first two articles explore Filipino women who live and work as domestic workers in Hong Kong (pp. 124-151). The first one is about how these women create their own spaces in the Exchange Square in Hong Kong to spend time together, talk, share their problems, and pack gifts for their relatives in their home country. The photographs accompanying the first article demonstrate the irony of making a female, immigrant and working class space in a square where the HSBC Bank is located, an institution associated with financial speculation and power (pp. 130-149). Another article explores the island of Cyprus, regarded as a woman oppressed by male power, seen in the nationalist discourses used in both sides of the island. The women have a powerless role and image in the public realm of Cyprus. The article looks at two institutions which have important role in the island: sex industry and the Church. The women are regarded as sex objects and slaves in the sex industry, such as those coming from ex-Soviet Bloc, Asia, Latin America and the Near East. Women do not have a voice also in the Orthodox Church, the richest institution of the island (pp. 152-162). Instead, in another piece, men who work in the City of London are presented as having the right and power to wear pink shirts, who overthrow gender norms by masculinising the colour pink. Ironically, men depicted in the article are all white and

well-dressed working in the City, a symbol of political, economic and cultural power and hegemony (pp.163-171). The same city was explored in the last two articles from different angles: a photographer describes his work experience in London, regarded as the symbol of greed, British spending culture, finance, and neoliberal capitalism (pp. 172-183). The last piece, an interview, explores how the City of London, centre of finance and business, is protected through an invisible wall, named as the “Ring of Steel” designed to discourage people from lingering which ends up in the normalisation of the fortress mentality and is regarded as a model to import elsewhere (pp. 184-199).

The fourth chapter, “Agency” discusses whether people can determine their own fate, and various forms of urban resistance and activism despite the existence of a debt economy which creates sustainable slavery (p. 203). The chapter begins by the discussion of a protest camp, the “Democracy Village” established in London during the protests in May 2010, symbolising “the topos and the nomos” of the post-political age, an open, autonomous and transitional space. This is the opposite of the “camp” mentality crystallised in Guantanamo, which limits people’s power to think and act (pp. 212-223). The second piece, an interview by the Spirit of ’68 Group, a cosmopolitan group formed to discuss the failure behind the 68 movements, questions the reasons of various past and present unsuccessful social movements: this was due to lack of sufficient material conditions in the case of the 68s, and the lack of consensus and ideology in the contemporary student protests in the UK. Also the resistance against the Barcelona 1992 Olympics in the form of collectives established by the intellectuals and creative classes of the city was unsuccessful due to its appropriation by big museums and consideration by people as a festive event instead of a real protest (pp. 224-239). Instead, the last three articles discuss several successful examples of urban resistance: the first discusses the “Battle of Cable Street” which took place in East End, London when people defended their multicultural spaces more than 75 years ago (pp. 240-251). The second article discusses a more recent urban resistance which was to defend Wards Corner, Tottenham in London by its residents, a successful initiative in creating a coherent narrative among very different people (pp. 252-264) and the last explains an “elite success story”, the case of William Morris, a political figure from the 19th century, transforming from a wealthy man into a socialist activist (pp. 265-278).

The last chapter “Stratification” explains the underlying mechanisms behind urban inequality, increased by and/or concealed behind various forms of urban transformation. The first piece, an interview with the director of the documentary “The Flickering Darkness”, explores the food industry in the city of Bogota and how it reflects the city’s massive class segregation. The article demonstrates the relationship between rural-to-urban migration, land grabs in rural areas, and urban development in Latin America, leading to a polarised class structure and a mixture of urban and rural culture in cities like Bogota (pp. 292-305). This is followed by a series of photographs, depicting

low-paid workers in one of the largest fruit and vegetable markets of Latin America, Corabastos (pp. 306-313). Another article explains how public space is re-created through the use of design by looking at the pilot project “Soft-Connection” in the post-war Beirut (Lebanon), planned to connect the unused urban park with the downtown. However, it ended up in creating a space sanitised from Beirut’s political and social past full of mourning and antagonism (pp. 314-331). The next one depicts performances of artists during the Urban Festival X which aimed at making Zagreb’s upper town, the city’s historic centre more visible and accessible by people. While these performances did not have a real effect on reviving neglected and under-used public spaces, they questioned the power of artists in tackling current urban problems (pp. 332-346). The last piece explores the Designated Public Place in Hackney, London, an alcohol control zone which would increase the segregation and stigmatisation of the working class, seen as people who do not like to work but prefer to depend on benefits (p. 347-358).

One shortcoming of the book is to cover similar topics in different chapters which led to repetitions. The book also covers inequalities experienced mostly in service sector, and the role of finance and real estate in creating and/or advancing inequalities. It might have covered different groups and sectors, such as precariat, conventional working classes and farmers and their role in fighting against austerity and creating collective resistances. As example, “precariat” had a pioneer role in Occupy movement in the USA and other similar resistances. However, as a product of an independent publishing house, the book does a good job in bringing together very diverse urban activists and subjects under the same title. It also shows the antagonisms brought by inequalities cutting across classes, genders, races, and cultures. In addition, it transcends the limits of academic writing and also uses photographs and interviews which lighten the gravity of its subject. By doing this, it addresses anyone who is interested in cities and various forms of inequality reflected on urban space in different parts of the world.

The book also raises several concerns on the realization of radical urban politics and engages with philosophical questions on possibilities and limitations of human agency to intervene in everyday problems due to pressure from despotic authorities and the apathy of people themselves. It discusses whether initiatives led by artists and/or creative classes can succeed due to the influence of big capital digesting them in the process or their evaluation by people as not real protests but as “events”. Another important issue the book raises is the conformism of people living in developed countries, concerned about of losing everything they have if they fight for their or other peoples’ rights. In this context, the role of the social media is also discussed in the book, seen as a lesser compensation for the people who cannot defend their rights in real life. Instead, people can play the role of rebel only in the twittering blogosphere, while the real world lacks real political action, eliminating real life community while fostering a consumer culture.

The book also allows the reader to reflect on power structure behind cities, i.e. if Hong Kong and Recife are emerging powers, who invests and lives in these cities? And if Corabastos market is manned by low-paid workers, where do they come from, what do their countrymen do in their rural settings, especially in a world said to be increasingly connected and dependent on each other? The current antagonisms are also fed by a global economy where technology alters the nature of production, killing sectors while creating new ones. However, it should be asked whether the new technologies and/or jobs compensate for the ever increasing number of unemployed people. The book also provides the reader to reflect on the power of design and planning in the transformation of cities. However, it is important to ask who designs for whom, which demonstrates different approaches of design and planning: the top-down examples of design, such as “Soft Connection Project” in Beirut and alcohol control zone (Designated Public Place) and “Ring of Steel” in London lead to segregation and stigmatisation of certain groups. Instead, the “Democracy Village” in London and the cardboard-box “casitas” in Exchange Square in Hong Kong made by Filipino domestic workers are examples of design made by people for people.

While raising these concerns, the book also allows the reader to think on the future by venturing out of the ivory tower of academia and bringing activism to the agenda. This is seen in the examples of several successful urban resistances depicted in the book, which emerged as the result of the urgent need for intervention and action against the neoliberal restructuring of cities. This urgent need can be the answer to the lack of consensus among diverse and sometimes conflicting ideologies which have created endless anti-capitalist radical social movements but could not create an alternative with a tangible effect. This urgent need for action can establish solidarity between different communities, identities and ideologies leading to future successful urban resistances. This is where social media can play a primary role by unifying diverse social movements taking place in different parts of the world and which can inspire activists in fighting against the same tyranny with different faces: neoliberalism.