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Holston, James

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# Life Among Urban Planners

THE CITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Eugenie L. Birch and Susan M. Wachter, Series Editors

A complete list of books in the series  
is available from the publisher.

# LIFE AMONG URBAN PLANNERS

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Practice, Professionalism, and Expertise  
in the Making of the City

*Edited by*

Jennifer Mack

*and*

Michael Herzfeld

**PENN**

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## AFTERWORD

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# The Problem of the Present in Anthropology and Urban Planning

James Holston

Both anthropology and urban planning are, fundamentally, investigations of the present. However, they are of different sorts. I would like to examine some of the differences and suggest some possible dialogues. Let me begin with a reflection on anthropology. I think it would be plausible to say that anthropology—and here I refer to sociocultural anthropology—is an investigation both of the structures of the present and of the contingencies that render the present inhabitable. Anthropology uses a combination of ethnographic, comparative, and historical methods to conduct this investigation. At its best, in my view, this anthropological practice aims to problematize present circumstances by focusing on their assumptions and contradictions—evident in what people say and do and primarily evident in the gaps between the two. The kind of anthropology I am talking about construes these foci as starting points, as problems, puzzles, gaps, even “crimes” in the Baudelairian sense, for an investigation of the genealogical forces and factors of historical transformation that structure the present as an insurgence of the past, a structure that conditions how we live—both opening and limiting possibilities.

This organization of daily life is robust precisely because we mostly take it for granted. Historically developed, it generally arrives in the present, so to speak, unannounced. Yet this robust everyday life is also fragile because it is produced at the intersection of many historical formulations that are often in conflict. Such intersections constitute the contingencies of the present, that is, unstable organizations, traces, and lines of the past that make the present a patchwork of multilayered and superimposed possibilities. Anthropological

research makes these contingencies visible. It shows them operating at the sites in which we inhabit the mostly taken-for-granted present—our walk to work, daily consumption, and home life as much as our understandings of property and rights. This kind of showing gives people a different view of their lives, renders strange what they assume to be familiar. This rendering indicates two great powers of anthropology as a disciplined production of critical knowledge: it defamiliarizes and potentially unsettles the way people live and, in showing the lived present as a superimposition of possibilities, it indicates emergent conditions—that is, possibilities for social change and creativity—that are rooted in people's practice rather than in utopian speculation.

Urban planning (and urban design) also investigates the inhabitations of the present. Unlike anthropology, however, it generally strives to become normative, predictive, and prescriptive of the present, shaping it, plan by plan, becoming the structure of the present. Moreover, whether in the form of modernist planning or participatory planning, it is a structuring based on a prior script that becomes imposed on the present as two-dimensional plans take on three-dimensional substance. In that process, planning is necessarily utopian. Whoever planned an urban environment for degradation, for conflict? As normative structure and script, however, planning often fails to deal with the inevitable contingencies of living, with the multiple forces and factors that are always unmaking and remaking actually lived lives. For this particular failure, anthropology, as an investigation of contingency, might have something important to say to planning.

Yet, at the same time, we must also ask what planning as a production of an imagined present has to say to anthropology. Too often anthropologists who want to engage urban planners fail to learn the language of planning (or urban design or architecture), and so fail in one of their own discipline's fundamental commitments to its subject—a failure of learning that does not happen to the same degree when anthropology engages other kinds of professional practice such as law, finance, or science. Without learning the language of urban planning, it becomes far more difficult for anthropologists to collaborate with planners, to be taken seriously by planners in their professional practice, to understand their point of view—even when people in the planning and architectural fields reach out for an anthropological perspective, as in the case of John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski's (1999) work on "everyday urbanism." Without learning the language, it becomes difficult as well for anthropology to incorporate within its field of study the problems of norm, prediction, design, and explanation with which planners have to grapple.

But let us first consider what anthropology can say to what has probably been the dominant kind of urban planning practice and that I would call modernist: this mode attempts to overcome the contingency of experience by totalizing it, that is, by fixing the present as a totally conceived plan based on an imagined future. This kind of planning is always already preserved by the very completeness of the plans themselves, conceived as “master plans” that often have a statute-like character as a set of instructions. The case of Brasília, for example, in which Costa’s master plan actually became law with the inauguration of the capital, is only an extreme of a general characteristic of planning to aspire to legislation.<sup>1</sup>

An anthropological critique of this kind of planning is not that it aspires to establish norms—the norm of a more egalitarian society as in Brasília’s case. To deny that dream is also to conceal or encourage a more totalitarian control of the present. The anthropological critique is rather that this totalized planning does not admit or develop productively the paradoxes of its imagined future. Instead, it attempts to be a plan without contradiction, without conflict. It assumes a rational domination of the future in which its totalizing plan dissolves any conflict between the imagined and the existing society in the imposed coherence of its order. This assumption is both arrogant and false. It fails to include as constituent elements of planning the conflict, ambiguity, and indeterminacy characteristic of actual social life. Moreover, it fails to consider the unintended and the unexpected as part of the model. Such assumptions are common to master plan solutions generally and not only to those in urban planning. Their basic feature is that they attempt to fix the future—or the past, as in historical preservation—by appealing to precedents that negate the value of present circumstance, of “everyday urbanism” (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski 1999). The crucial question for us to consider, therefore, is how to include the ethnographic present in planning, that is, the possibilities for change encountered in existing social conditions.

Not all master plans negate the present as a means to get to the imagined future (or past) of planning. A powerful counterexample is the US Constitution—which ~~it~~ is important for anthropologists to engage as a master plan, given the ways in which contemporary right-wing judicial activists and the Tea Party movement press it into use. The Constitution is certainly a master plan and certainly modern in proposing a system of national government “in order to form a more perfect union.” Yet its great strength is precisely that its provisions are imprecise and incomplete—the arguments of “original intent” by right-wing judicial activists notwithstanding. Moreover, the Constitution

is distrustful of the very institutions of government it creates. As a blueprint, it does not try to legislate the future. Rather, its seven original articles and twenty-seven amendments embody a few guiding principles—for example, federalism, separation of powers, due process, and checks and balances—that not only channel conflict into mediating institutions but also protect against possible abuses of the governmental powers they create. Above all, they establish a trust that future generations of citizens—even “original intenter”—have the ability and the right to make their own histories by interpreting what the master plan means in light of their own experience and conviction.

The US Constitution has, therefore, two kinds of planning projects: state building and citizenship building. The key point for our discussion is that the latter is conditioned by the former but not reducible to it, because the Constitution secures for citizens a real measure of insurgence against the state. On the one hand, it designs a state with the *minimum* conditions necessary to institutionalize both order and conflict. On the other hand, it guarantees the necessary conditions for social mobilization as a means to include the unintended and the unforeseeable as possible sources of new constitutional interpretation.

This frame of complementary perspectives offers an important suggestion for thinking about a new production of the city. If modernist planning relies on and builds up the state, then its necessary counteragent is a mode of planning that addresses the formations of insurgent citizenship. Planning theory needs to be grounded in these antagonistic complements, both based on ethnographic and not utopian possibility: on one side, the project of state-directed futures that can be transformative but that is always a product of specific politics; and, on the other, the project of engaging planners with the insurgent forms of the social that often derive from and transform the first project but that are in important ways heterogeneous and outside the state. These insurgent forms are found both in organized grassroots mobilizations and in everyday practices that, in different ways, empower, parody, derail, or subvert state agendas. They are found, in other words, in struggles over what it means to be a member of the modern state—which is why I refer to them with the term *citizenship*. Membership in the state has never been a static identity, given the dynamics of global migrations and national ambitions. Citizenship changes as new members emerge to advance their claims, expanding its realm, and as new forms of segregation and violence counter these advances, eroding it. The sites of insurgent citizenship are found at the intersection of these processes of expansion and erosion.<sup>2</sup>

These sites vary with time and place. Today, in many cities, they include the realm of the homeless, networks of “illegal” immigration, autoconstructed peripheries in which the poor build their own homes in precarious material and legal conditions, ganglands, fortified condominiums, employee-owned factories, squatter settlements, suburban migrant labor camps, sweatshops, and the zones of the so-called new racism. They are sites of insurgence because they introduce into the city new identities and practices that disturb established histories. These new identities and the disturbances they provoke may be of any social group, elite or subaltern. Their study views the city as not merely the container of this process but as its subject as well—a space of emergent identities and their social organization. It concentrates on practices that engage the problematic nature of belonging to society. It privileges such disturbances, emergences, and engagements because it is at the fault lines of these processes that we perceive the dynamism of society. This perception is quite different, however, from a sociological accretion of data, and its register includes the litter and not only the monuments of urban experience.

This dynamism and its perception are the theoretical objectives of a planning linked to insurgent forms of the social. It differs from the modernist objectives of planning because it aims to understand society as a continual reinvention of the social, in the present. Anthropology suggests that planners need to look for the emergent forms of the social and their repression that indicate this invention. They are not hard to find in the wake of this century’s important processes of change. The new spaces of belonging, membership, and repression that result are especially the product of the compaction and reterritorialization in cities of so many new residents with histories, cultures, and demands that disrupt the normative and assumed categories of social life. This disruption is the source of insurgent citizenship and the object of a planning theory that includes the ethnographic present in its constitution.

Such an approach to planning will generate a new theorization to account for the kind of production of cities that has dominated global urbanization for the last seventy years: I refer to peripheral urbanization. The anthropological reconstruction of the trope of “peripheries” unsettles dominant formulations in urban theory that have as their reference the type of urbanization that has shaped the history of large capitalist cities in the North Atlantic. In these formulations, the use of “peripheries” generally disqualifies spaces, residents (citizens and immigrants), and modes of urbanization. Today, however, “peripheries” signifies the production of most of the urban spaces around the world. The anthropological study of these peripheries uses the term to create

a problem-space that allows us to call attention to these other logics of the production of the urban and their political potentialities.

For example, in this paradigm shift, “peripheries” stands for the production of the urban in different temporalities. By that I mean that these are not spaces already made, spaces to be consumed as finished products first and inhabited later. Rather, peripheries are spaces in the making, never quite done, always being altered, expanded, and elaborated upon. They are also spaces that frequently unsettle official logics—for example, those of legal property, formal labor, colonial dominance, state regulation, and market capitalism. Thus cities urbanized through peripheral formations are usually marked by significant spatial and social inequality. Yet, because of their constant incompleteness and remaking, these are cities of multiple formations of inequality, and categories such as *formal* and *regulated* are always shifting and unstable. These urban spaces also create distinct urban practices and institutions, with distinctive forms of everydayness, practices of sociability, circulation, and connectivity.

This anthropological decentering of North Atlantic urban theory also demonstrates that these peripheral productions of urban space generate new modes of politics through practices that produce new kinds of citizens, claims, and contestations. These new modes of politics are not primarily centered either on the universe of labor—work, factory life, and unions—or on that of political parties as in classic North Atlantic social theory. Rather, they are centered on the production of urban space itself—primarily residential urban space—and its qualities, deficiencies, forms, and practices. In many parts of the world, urban social movements and neighborhood associations have been the organizational focus of these claims, but in the last years NGOs and cultural and artistic movements have also been important. Moreover, the concept of a right to the city has emerged as a focus of civic organization and a counterpoint to national citizenship in many cities with significant populations of marginalized citizens and immigrants.

In sum, an anthropology of urban planning would emphasize a mode of planning and design based on contingency itself, on planning the ethnographically possible. Contingency planning works with plans that are always incomplete. It includes improvisation and experiment as a means of dealing with the uncertainty of present conditions. Its means are suggested by present possibilities for an alternative future, not by an imagined and already scripted future. It is a mode of planning based on imperfect knowledge, incomplete control, and lack of resources, which incorporates ongoing conflict and contradiction as constitutive elements. In this sense, the anthropology of urban

planning has a significant insurgent aspect that emphasizes the constitutive roles of conflict and ambiguity in shaping the multiplicity of contemporary everyday urban life. In a second sense, this heterogeneity works against the modernist absorption of citizenship into a project of state building, providing alternative possible sources for the development of new kinds of practices and narratives about belonging to and participating in the city. This “working against” defines what I called an insurgent citizenship; and its spatial mode, an insurgent urbanism. This insurgence is important to the project of rethinking the social in planning because it reveals a realm of the possible that is rooted in the heterogeneity of lived experience, which is to say, not in utopian futures but in the assemblage of the ethnographic present that anthropology investigates.

### Notes

1 See my discussion in Holston 1989.

2 For further discussion of this concept, see Holston 2008.

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