

THE CITY: TODAY'S FRONTIER ZONE

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Abstract: Cities are complex systems, but they are incomplete systems. All cities are becoming the same, but all cities are competing with each other. Here actors from different worlds meet, but there are no clear rules of engagement. It is in this context that the complex global city becomes a frontier space with political consequences. Here we can find new hybrid bases from which to act, spaces where the powerless can make history even when they do not get empowered.

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Cities are complex systems. But they are incomplete systems. In this mix lies the possibility of making – making the urban, the political, the civic, a history, an economy. Further, this mix of complexity and incompleteness has allowed cities to outlive more formal and closed systems, such as republics, kingdoms, corporations. The urban may not be alone in having these characteristics, but these characteristics are a necessary part of the DNA of the urban.

Conceiving of cities in these terms means that much of today's dense built up terrain is not marked by cityness and its capabilities. It is mere built density, and it is often simply repetitive in form and in content: endless rows of office buildings or of high rise housing. The common practice – especially among politicians! – today is to take all this built density as constituting cities and urbanization. Differentiation becomes critical confronted with such superficial generics. Most importantly, this generic built density lacks the enablements that cities can give even to the weaker segments of their population¹. The city is a space where those without power can make a history, a neighborhood economy and culture, and more².

As I discuss in this piece, incompleteness, complexity, and the possibility of making take on urbanized formats that vary enormously across time and place. They are often features of a city that come out of deep histories of place; this also explains why every city is distinct, something we can hardly say about office parks.

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And yet, the growing standardization of many components of the built environment has generated much confusion when it comes to what I think of as the specialized differences among cities. A brief detour on this question might help.

URBAN BUILT ENVIRONMENTS AS INFRASTRUCTURE: NECESSARY BUT INDETERMINATE

The strong impulse to confuse cityness with built density can easily lead to a simplified understanding of what is a city. This confusion is further fed by the fact that cities have more and more standardized built environments, something that is often taken as a given. In fact, it should be examined and de-coded.

Thus I have long argued that we need to recognize that today much standardized building in cities is functioning as infrastructure. I use infrastructure here to refer to an entity that is necessary but indeterminate; thus train tracks can be used for trains carrying food or bombs, so to speak. And a standard high-rise building in a city can contain offices, or dance studios, or designers' showrooms, or what I describe as "urban manufacturing" (such as craftworkers making design-er lamps for galleries, and so on).

In short, how we use a given building provides it with meaning, and thereby marks it. We must find out how a standard building is used before we assume that what it contains is also standardized – for instance, the notion that an office building is full of office workers. It may not. More generally, how a city's buildings, whether standardized or not, are used can partly shape the urbanity of a city, and it can also mark its specialized difference. Thus the warehouses of Soho and Tribeca in New York City have become major loft-housing and studios, a critical part of the city's art and style sectors.

Why does this effort at differentiation and specificity matter? The fact that more and more buildings in many cities have become standardized easily leads to the notion that the economies and cultures of cities have also become standardized; and this is mostly wrong, even if we see much standardization in consumer cultures.

If all cities are becoming the same, then all cities are competing with each other. This, in turn, promotes the far too common fear among urban leaderships that they have to ac-

cept all conditions demanded by powerful global firms that claim they can move to any city – even if this is not quite true³.

THE CITY AS A FRONTIER SPACE

The large complex city, especially if global, is a new frontier zone. Actors from different worlds meet there, but there are no clear rules of engagement. Where the historic frontier, as seen from imperial centers, was in the far stretches of the “colonies”, today it is deep inside those imperial centers. These cities, whether in the global north or south have become a strategic frontier zone for global corporate capital. Much of the work of forcing deregulation, privatization, and new fiscal and monetary policies on the host governments had to do with creating the formal instruments to construct their equivalent of the old military “fort” of the historic frontier: the regulatory environment they need in city after city worldwide to ensure a global space of operations.

But these cities have also become a strategic frontier zone for those who lack power, those who are disadvantaged, outsiders, discriminated minorities. The disadvantaged and excluded can gain *presence* in such cities, presence *vis-à-vis* power and presence *vis-à-vis* each other. This signals the possibility of a new type of politics, centered in new types of political actors. It is not simply a matter of having or not having power. These are new hybrid bases from which to act, spaces where the powerless can make history even when they do not get empowered.

One outcome we are seeing in city after city is the making of informal politics by actors-with-a-project – whether these actors are with power or without. It is particularly the work of making the public and making the political in urban space that become critical at a time when national political space is increasingly dominated by powerful actors, both private and public, that are basically not accountable to the larger public.

The city, unlike office parks, enables a kind of public-making work that can produce disruptive narratives, and make legible the local and the silenced. The large complex global cities are one key space for this making⁴. These cities are, I argue, one of the few frontier spaces – with all the inequities, conflicts and potentials for making such a space entails. It is the possibility of *making* that matters here, given the ascend-

ance of increasingly parallel bordered spaces for respectively those whose advantage grows and those who lose ground.

This emergent frontier-space function arises in a context of increasingly hardwired borderings inside cities and across cities. Gated communities are but the most visible moment of these borderings. The uses that global corporate capital makes of 'our' cities are part of that hard bordering. The common assertion that we are a far less bordered world than 30 years ago only holds if we consider the traditional borders of the interstate system, and then only for the cross border flow of capital, information and particular population groups. Far from moving towards a borderless world, let me argue that even as we lift some of these barriers for some sectors of our economies and society, these same sectors are actively making new types of borderings that are transversal and impenetrable⁵. It is in this context that the complex global city becomes a frontier space with political consequences.

NOTES

¹ These can then become the types of dense destructive environments well described by Sophie Body-Gendrot, *Globalization, Fear and Insecurity: The Challenges for Cities North and South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

² *Urban Capabilities: An Essay on our Challenges and Differences*, "Journal of International Affairs", Spring/Summer 2012, Vol. 65, No. 2, pp. 85-95.

³ I have developed these various issues at length with multiple illustrations of several cities in *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012, 4th ed.).

⁴ Elsewhere (*The Global Street: Making the Political*, "Globalizations", October 2011, Vol. 8, No. 5, pp. 565-571) I have examined a particular angle of this disjuncture by focusing on the importance of indeterminate space in cities – another major difference with office parks. By the global street I intend to capture space that recurs in city after city but is indeterminate and hence gets marked by the specific cultural, social and built features of that city.

⁵ To this regard, see also *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).