

# New Urban Worlds

Inhabiting  
Dissonant  
Times

**AbdouMaliq Simone**  
**Edgar Pieterse**





**"Ceaselessly inventive and frequently provocative, *New Urban Worlds* anticipates new models, methods and modes of urbanism. Paying attention to the details, AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse recount a multiplicity of urban stories from Asia and Africa – stories of political possibility and experimental potential – with a keen-eyed and always creative purpose."**

***Jamie Peck, University of British Columbia***

**"Deeply conceptual and creatively pragmatic, this is a core text from two of the most significant voices in urban studies today. They offer a highly original retheorization of the urban and open up distinctive new horizons for scholars everywhere seeking to catch the dynamic, varied meanings and effects of the urban."**

***Jennifer Robinson, University College London***

It is well known that the world is transitioning to an irrevocable urban future whose epicentre has moved into the cities of Asia and Africa. The full implications of this transformation cry out to be understood because city building (and retrofitting) cannot but be an undertaking entangled in profound societal and cultural shifts.

In this highly original account, renowned urbanists AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse offer a call for action based fundamentally on the detail of people's lives. Urban regions are replete with residents who are compelled to come up with innovative ways to maintain or extend livelihoods, whose makeshift character is rarely institutionalized into a fixed set of practices, locales or organizational forms. This novel analytical approach reveals a more complex relationship between people, the state and other agents than has previously been understood. As the authors argue, we need adequate concepts and practices to grasp the composition and intricacy of these shifting efforts to make visible new political possibilities for action and social justice in cities across Asia and Africa.

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# New Urban Worlds

For these inhabitants of new worlds:  
Manu, Na'ilah and Rafael

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# Preface

*New Urban Worlds* is primarily a polemic, an impassioned argument that stretches across diverse experiences, literatures and professional domains. It is a polemic because it tries to “call for things” even if all of the evidence is not yet in and often hard to come by. We call for the intersection of long-honed everyday practices of African and Asian urban residents with new forms of governing and with a strategic deployment of technological innovations of varying kinds. We desire to restore experimentation as a normative aspect of living in and running cities and want to think about how concretely to create space for such experimentation to be possible.

We are aware that, when you call for things, the immediate question is “How do you know enough about what is going on in order to call for something specific?” And, even then, should you reveal everything you know is going on, especially at a time when we are all being “read” in ways that we cannot control and often do not even know are taking place? But let us consider briefly what we think is going on – something about the fundamental conditions that drive the “calling” of this book.

If you are one of the scores of millions of residents across much of the urban “South” who cannot depend upon one specific job to earn your keep, who lacks sufficient documentation to secure a place to live over the long term, or who can’t afford to get sick or into any kind of trouble, what is

it that you pay attention to in order to know something about what to do? What happens if the people you rely upon for support or information are no longer available or suddenly turn against you? What happens when the skills you have to apply are also those of an increasing number of residents, and competition becomes increasingly fierce for opportunities? The question here is how can you best know what is going on and try to situate yourself in a position where opportunities might “come your way”? In other words, how can you be at the right place at the right time when there is no clear map available? We are convinced that these kinds of considerations dominate the minds and spiritual practices of most urban dwellers, yet much of what appears in both urban scholarship and policy prescripts seems oblivious.

In a not dissimilar way, researchers of urban life face difficulties when it comes to engaging with the largely makeshift complexion of many cities in Africa and Asia. The enormous transformations of the built environment and the enhanced possibilities of consumption that have marked even some of the most marginal of the world’s cities should not detract from acknowledging just how dependent the majority of the urban residents of these regions are upon constantly putting together some workable form of income and inhabitation. The makeshift character of much of what this majority does is quite literally “make+shift,” as pointed out by Vasudevan (2015).

Whatever they come up with is rarely institutionalized into a fixed set of practices, locales or organizational forms. This doesn’t mean that relationships and economic activities do not endure, that people do not find themselves rooted in the same place and set of affiliations over a long period of time. Rather, these stabilities come from constant efforts on the part of inhabitants to redefine the boundaries and interfaces between work, leisure, home, neighborhood and elsewhere. It entails constantly addressing the questions “What spaces are relevant to me?,” “What do I pay attention to and where?,” “Who do I talk to and do things with?,” “Who can I depend on and show things to?” In neighborhoods across the urban South, whatever is made, in terms of economic activities, buildings and social solidarities, then shifts in terms of its availability to specific uses and users, as well as its exposure to new potentials and vulnerability.

Drawing upon decades of work in poor, working- and lower-middle-class districts in urban regions across Africa and South-East Asia, this book attempts to weave interconnections among different ways of engaging and thinking about the complexity of how different urban actors decide and act within highly circumscribed and often uncertain contexts.

In methodological terms, it means that we locate our research and propositions within a relational epistemological force field that is anchored by two axes. The first axis stretches from surface knowledge to in-depth understandings of highly localized phenomena, including psychological interiors of actors. Surface knowledge references the insights that one can assemble from quantitative data sets that allow the analyst to consider scale, frequency, relationalities and patterns over time. Quantitative trends are crucial to appreciate the specificities of urbanization dynamics in diverse geographical scales in the early twenty-first century, when the very foundations of the economy, political systems and cultural reference points are undergoing profound change. At the same time, due to the “make+shift” character of these cities, it is equally important to expand dramatically in-depth accounts of the social drawing on relational ontologies (Pieterse 2015a). It is only by triangulating both depth and surface dimensions of contemporary urbanism that can we hope to get a purchase on what is actually going on.

The second axis of our epistemological force field stretches between applied theoretical concerns that we define, in contradistinction to philosophy, aesthetics and the poetic, as “grounded pragmatism.” These denote theoretical rest-stops that store conceptual resources to support sense-making of different kinds of data, but also to instigate propositional concepts and experiments. This book draws on an eclectic mix of theoretical resources to anchor our sense-making of highly fluid contexts, but we have deliberately resisted getting into the nitty-gritty of competing theoretical frames or performing a review of the literature. The references offer the reader a comprehensive insight into materials we find most compelling. Moreover, we are not particularly interested in the academic game of theoretical one-upmanship that seems to dominate so much of urban scholarship these days.

In a nutshell, this epistemological force field allows us to adopt a research approach that seeks to articulate the gener-

ous engagement with the details of urban life with the power of re-description in order to understand what might be going on while keeping an eye on clarifying resonant propositions. Thus, the work we have done includes ethnographic and applied research, forging research, advocacy and policy-making networks, advising municipal governments and development agencies, and starting and running urban institutions dedicated to enhancing broad-based participation in making rules and plans. The language of the book then reflects these different viewpoints and engagements with different actors, sectors and cities. It is a language that covers different “musical scales” – i.e., styles and rhythms. It looks for different ways into cityscapes that always seem to be switching, pulsating and reshaping. Thus the analysis applied and the proposals suggested are experimental and provisional and invariably ask for patience to see the conceptual journey to the end. Our account reflects a need to be able to do things differently now. While massive and long-term transformations are of course necessary, this book attempts to make use of what exists now but is sometimes not seen, not read, and thus does not become a resource for deciding and acting. While we offer strategic visions for how to face the enormous challenges of impoverishment, urban growth during climate change, and the exigency of justice, we concentrate on mapping out the potentials of the immediate – the lived realms of the “make+shift” city.

Just like the processes through which urban actors decide and act, this task of reworking the immediate is full of twists and turns. This is in part because the urban is full of paradoxes. Clear differentiations between urban and rural, local and global, self and other, time and space, human and non-human, North and South, public and private – long critical vehicles of orientation – are simultaneously intensifying and waning, becoming more sharply drawn as they are also being folded into each other. In a world where there is so much to pay attention to, where each decision seems more urgent, imbued with greater significance, it is harder to make distinctions between what is and what is not important to pay attention to, what is salient or irrelevant. This means that decision-making gets simultaneously more complicated and frustrating. The constitutive nature and generative potential of paradox is foregrounded throughout the book.



The capacities of the poor to get by with little, and thus to be rendered either targets of development or manipulated pawns in a game of continuous displacement, may ironically suggest a conceivable future for everyone in light of carbonated dystopias that become more apparent every year that CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction targets are spectacularly missed. How is it possible to live through these seeming paradoxes? How is it possible to maintain the productive boundaries among places, between spatial exteriors and interiors, and among distinctive ways of life without being disabled by their paradoxical encounters? How to think the doubleness of things, of ways in which differences can move toward and draw from each other as a movement of justice and equanimity?

In *New Urban Worlds* we try to follow and understand some of the dimensions of the “make+shift,” but we do so with the proviso that this pursuit does not end with a systemic conclusion or the pretence that we think we have got our hands on what is really taking place. Much of our uncertainty here has to do with a politics of urban knowledge where, in many instances, the “majority” has been ordered to “shut up” and not make waves. Equally significant is the tendency on the part of government and the apparatuses of the corporate and political elite to unleash violence and exert control over the uses of space and materials. They often either marshal or steal outright the capacities, ideas and resourcefulness of the majority in order to manoeuvre through situations where they otherwise would lack legitimacy and know-how.

At the same time, in order for any “make+shift” to work in a grounded pragmatic sense, it has to embody generosity, reciprocity, a sense of openness and experimentation in order to keep affective ties, information and cooperation flowing. So, in order to create space for such exchanges, residents have often had to make it look like nothing much was ever going on, or to amplify the problematic aspects of their everyday lives so as to appear so depleted or self-occupied that it would seem impossible for there to be any room for experiments, sharing, or give and take.

This does not mean that residents don’t have a rough time or that they do not spend a lot of time and effort just to put food on household tables. It doesn’t mean that the manipulations and everyday brutalities are simply a deception. They

are present, and urban life for many is a constant process of being worn down and wasted. But, at the same time, to circumvent a life of dispossession often means taking the risk of losing everything or of playing with practices and ways of making money that embed individuals in relationships that are both volatile and trusted – that build trust, obligations and reciprocities from the sheer fact that they are not recorded, institutionalized. This can be seen in operations such as gambling, smuggling, pooling, diverting, and bundling time, money, people and things into seemingly weird schemes or hustles.

As such, much of research that depends on getting people to say what it is that they are doing and what it means cannot readily apply, even if there is no choice but to talk to as many people as possible as the primary means through which to try to come to grips with what is going on in a particular place or situation. All of this is to say that, in this book, we are up against a complicated politics of knowledge, of how inhabitants decide and act. This has led us over the years to try out many different ways of engaging different residents and aspects of the cities in Africa and South-East Asia where we have done most of our work.

The research business is full of many tricks, particularly the ethnographic variety, and we have employed many of these throughout the years. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of our engagement with urban processes is that most of the research we have conducted over the past decades has been done at the behest of some local institution or movement that itself is trying to extend its work into new areas of a city or to equip its members with new tools to mobilize residents more effectively around issues that are important to them. This task has meant having to come up with ways that help “sneak” inhabitants – who have been ignored and marginalized – into parts of the city that don’t want them there, so that they could find out for themselves more about what is going on. It is a method that combines performance, invention and, at times, just a little bit of deception.

We have worked across many different popular participation exercises implemented by municipal governments and NGOs to try and broaden the constituencies involved in planning, service delivery and program development. We have worked with local markets, political campaigns and municipal

restructuring programs. We have worked as retailers in local markets, as journeymen in long-distance trade networks, and as teachers in local schools. We have sometimes been asked by associations of residents themselves to help them look differently at their own dynamics, to become researchers of their own living and economic spaces. All of this work has produced a great deal of stories, glimmers here and there of well-oiled machines at work. But, mostly, these engagements have shown that there is an inordinate amount of complexities at work, even in situations of clear deprivation where the story would seem to be a simple one of dispossession and little else.

We emphasize the point about the politics of knowledge because it is crucial to an overarching point that we attempt to make here. That is, nothing really can be done to make urban life more sustainable, just and economically viable without going through the “make+shift” complexion of the city and urban regions. Whether the processes of urban transformation entail incremental development, militant social activism, smart city management, entrepreneurialism or state-based redistribution, they all have to be effectively linked to the everyday makeshift practices through which the majority of residents in Africa and Asia come to grips with urban life. These links will have to be predicated on a broader, more open and experimental engagement with practices which are often not unambiguous in terms of their ethical composition and efficacy, which are often of limited duration, and which, like the “make+shift,” change their looks and ways of operating.

Instead of being quick to rectify apparent problematic situations, what residents are up to needs to be engaged with in its own terms, even when terms, words and concepts may not actually be available. Often, all we have to work with is a vague sense of things or an unyielding determination on the part of residents. Too often activists and policy-makers expect that residents should do more to fight for their rights and for justice. Too often they are criticized for being enamored of consuming the latest products. Too often they are condemned for their fundamentalism, aggressiveness, lack of initiative or dogged pursuit of money. It is important both to step back from those assumptions and to find more ways of stepping into the fray as a means of thinking through what

else might be taking place. This is why we insist on the importance of a multiplication of slow research work that falls on the “depth” end of the methodological axis.

Furthermore, we should not assume that residents are interminably resilient and thus capable of finding their ways out of jams and dead-end projects. To engage difficult places on their own terms does not mean simply leaving them alone or relinquishing the responsibility to speak critically. But it does mean, as entailed in the sense of the “make+shift,” that researchers, advocates, politicians, administrators and service providers should make their “move.” They also must be willing to shift what they do and think in face of the wide range of responses those moves will inevitably elicit, and not seek some overarching, standard set of development procedures.

That said, as we argue later on, there are at least four aspects at the core of an anticipatory politics and research ethic for the city:

- 1 a rigorous and unromantic engagement with technological change as digital platforms become increasingly pervasive, enabling and predatory;
- 2 a commitment to walking the street and finding compelling ways to re-describe the affective dynamics of everyday urbanism and the kinds of horizon lines to which they may be pointing;
- 3 coming to grips with the changing and creaking institutional formats of the state (hierarchy and market), market and civil society organizations (network and hierarchy) with an eye toward figuring alternative formats to curate organizational designs that are fit for purpose;
- 4 instilling a passion for experimentation in order to forge new concepts and imaginaries that can anchor and accelerate new practices, at diverse scales and in numerous institutional settings. Practically, this points to a sensibility to advance learning through experimentation.

The skills and sensibilities at work in all of the various home-grown, city-specific varieties of the “make+shift” have to be the basis for a pluri-scalar approach to climate adaptation strategies and a more just city. New employment opportunities must be coupled to the deployment of green technologies



and implemented through various pilot experiments. City-wide social movements must be engaged in policy debates, planning commissions and sectoral reforms. Grassroots coalition building has to be more creative in terms of coordinating different forms of organization.

Again, a spirit of openness and generosity must persist across these efforts. This entails a willingness to work with the *details* of how everyday life, institutions and technologies actually operate without necessarily rushing to envelop the details in ready-made ideological or interpretive frameworks. In this book we have tried to stay close to these details and to work with the knotty ambiguities of everyday urban life, knowing full well that the epistemological ground is shifting beneath our feet all of the time.