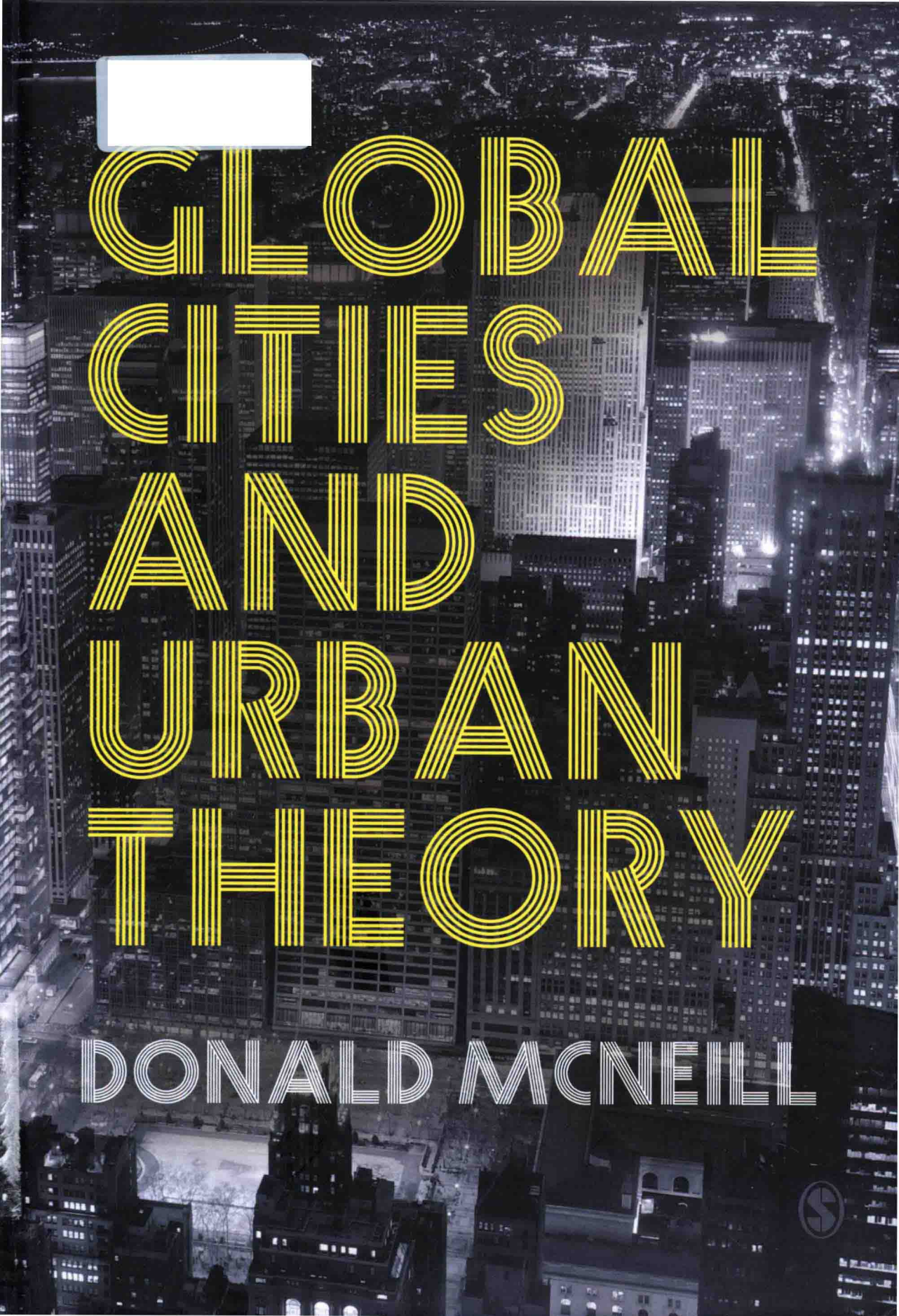
GLOBAL
CITIES
AND
URBAN
THEORY
DONALD MCNEILL

'McNeill weaves paths through theory and cities via architects, airports, factories, hotels, cathedrals, taxis, ports and myriad other sites of money, movement, power and marginality. It is a journey worth taking - and McNeill proves a splendid guide.'

James D. Sidaway, Professor of Political Geography, National University of Singapore

'With urban theory now at a turning point, this text should set the contours of debate as the emerging twenty-first century city is understood and theorized.'

Mark Davidson, Associate Professor of Geography, Clark University

What do we mean by 'global'?
What constitutes a 'city'?
And what objects and practices are involved in putting the two together?

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Donald McNeill is Professor of Urban and Cultural Geography at Western Sydney University.

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GLOBAL CITIES AND URBAN THEORY

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'As Donald McNeill notes early in this book, scholarship on global cities "has been widespread and varied". McNeill weaves paths through theory and cities via architects, airports, factories, hotels, cathedrals, taxis, ports and myriad other sites of money, movement, power and marginality. It is a journey worth taking – and McNeill proves a splendid guide.'

James D. Sidaway,
Professor of Political Geography, National University of Singapore

'Donald McNeill's book brings exceptional clarity to the core concerns of contemporary urban theory. Using a series of fascinating case studies and drawing extensively on politico-economic and actor network theories, the text demonstrates how cities are constitutive of, and constituted by, intersecting global process. In doing so, McNeill pushes forward the boundaries of critical urban studies by offering a systematic and crystal clear urban epistemology. With urban theory now at a turning point, this text should set the contours of debate as the emerging twenty-first century city is understood and theorized.'

Mark Davidson,
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'Donald McNeill has written a creative, innovative and authoritative analysis of the contemporary global city. It provides an impressive critical understanding of what we call the global and the city by focusing on the key material objects and social processes involved in constituting the relations between them. *Global Cities* provides an analysis of the key engineered sites of the cathedral of St. Peters, the airport and hotel, air conditioning and smart cities – amongst others - helping us to understand why some cities have been more influential than others in shaping global practices.'

Professor Simon Marvin,
Director of the Urban Institute, University of Sheffield

'This book asks fundamental questions for urban research. What is a city? In what sense is a city "global"? McNeill examines key forms of cultural, economic, and political power and practice through which cities are composed as material concentrations, from religion and logistics to air-conditioning systems and smart cities. The result, in a discussion that ranges from Rome and Paris to Dubai and Sydney, is a powerful and innovative account of why and how particular spaces, practices and forms in the city curate globality.'

Colin McFarlane,
Professor of Urban Geography, Durham University

'We may indeed have arrived at an "urban age" but there is precious little critical insight about this important human development. *Global Cities and Urban Theory* is therefore a very important arrival and should be widely read and discussed. The book distills and advances Donald McNeill's considerable ground breaking analyses of the global urban system, especially of the corporate and professional elites that seek to shape, indeed control, their destiny. McNeill deploys a highly original and timely critique to challenge the assumptions and assertions of urban power.'

Brendan Gleeson,
Director of The University of Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donald McNeill is Professor of Urban and Cultural Geography at Western Sydney University, having previously lectured at King's College London, Southampton and Strathclyde. His books include *The Global Architect: Firms, Fame and Urban Form* (Routledge, 2008), *New Europe: Imagined Spaces* (Arnold, 2004) and *Urban Change and the European Left: Tales from the New Barcelona* (Routledge, 1999).

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INTRODUCTION

BRIGHT LIGHTS, GLOBAL CITIES

The global city has been with us for some time now. At some point in the 1990s, it became clear that the imagined geography of the nation-state was being challenged by the likes of New York, Tokyo and London, that cities were making impacts on the world disproportionate to their territorial footprints and that the apparently inexorable suburbanization of economic activity was faltering. More recently, Asia Pacific cities such as Shanghai, Singapore and Sydney began to be mentioned in a similar vein as they grew rapidly in both stature and size. The symbols and signifiers of these cities were often presented in the media with both bravado and disdain: scurrying crowds of suited bankers, gleaming office towers, luxury brands, extravagant bonuses.

Many working to promote this image were far from disinterested. It has been increasingly obvious that consultants seeking global brand recognition see cities as a universal field of understanding. And so, the long-established Brookings Institution partners with the investment bank JP Morgan to develop global cities benchmarking; the management consultancy Accenture produces its Global Cities Strategy; the architecture and engineering firm Aecom launches its own Global Cities Institute; the giant information technology firm IBM promotes smart cities strategies which seek a universal systems-based solution for urban issues. Then there are the seemingly endless lists of city rankings, often promoted by media brands: the magazine *Monocle* produces its own quality of life urban rankings, *The Economist* orders cities according to ease of doing business. The list could go on, but the point should be clear: even speaking about global cities is an industry in its own right. And, above all, there is a sense that cities are always involved in practices of comparison, self-assessment and promotion for reasons that are sometimes very practical, and sometimes highly nebulous.

The response within scholarship has been widespread and varied. Globalization as a theory has been gathering in significance across the social sciences and humanities since the 1970s (James and Stenger 2014). Saskia Sassen's *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (1991) brought this to the study of cities, arguing that the mere possession of corporate headquarters was not enough for cities to 'command and control' the increasingly financialized world economy of the 1980s. Rather, it was the co-presence or agglomeration of interacting producer services firms that gave cities their ability to influence global flows. From the UK, a cluster of scholars working within Loughborough University generated both significant theoretical framings of a world cities network (for example, Beaverstock et al. 2000; Taylor 2004), as well as

hosting the the Globalization and World Cities (GaWC) website which gathered a diverse range of working papers and reports from scholars worldwide. The landmark *Global Cities Reader* (Brenner and Keil 2006) runs to 50 extracts from a wide range of perspectives including fields of representation, cultural identity, and the nature of the concept as a sociological and geographical problematic. The field continues to be expanded and developed, both in terms of an explicit exploration of global cities as a concept (for example, Acuto and Steele 2013; Bassens and van Meeteren 2015), but also through ongoing debates about the nature of 'city' and 'urban' as explanatory concepts (for example, Robinson 2006; Brenner and Schmid 2015; Davidson and Iveson 2015a, 2015b).

My focus here is on exploring a set of quite diverse literatures which together explain, or call into question, what, exactly, could be called global, what constitutes a city, and what objects and practices are involved in putting the two together. A number of theorists have worked to provide contrasting entry points to the world cities and global cities literatures: Richard Smith (2003a, 2003b), who provided some early, radically post-structural set of analyses to the field; Jenny Robinson (2002, 2005, 2006, 2011, 2013), whose 'ordinary cities' motif sees the global ascription as being part of a categorizing impulse rooted in Western modernity; and anthropologists who explore the nature of local knowledge and contingency (e.g. Roy and Ong 2011). My purpose in the book is to work across these different literatures in a dialogue with my own empirical observations over the years (e.g. McNeill 2003, 2009a, 2010, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). I have also like many been influenced by the work of actor-network theorists, and especially Bruno Latour, whose 'flat' ontology of networks is well known and aggressive in its opposition to scalar analysis; as one commentator summarized, 'the actor does not pre-exist the network but arises as a product of it ... the actor [is] a relational effect ... it does not take actors' capacities as pre-given black boxes but problematizes the very process and precariousness of assembling them' (Müller 2015: 72).

Throughout, I have focused on a series of objects or sites that serve to *concentrate* the city. Their material density means that a small number of sites have a disproportionate effect on the surrounding urban territory and have powerful, long-lasting, durable impact on their relations with other places, objects and peoples. Through a wide range of urbanized practices such as sacralization, ordering, governmentality, indexicality, hospitality, air conditioning and prediction, these cities are being both composed and acted upon in a material way. However, just listing and describing these practices, devices and sites is not sufficient in itself, and the book works with several standpoints of origin: the importance of cultural and political economies of cities; the significance of the material density of global cities, and their concentration of devices; and the nature of how people and objects, the socio-material, act together to produce these spaces.

Certainly, following materiality through to its logical conclusion could be as exhausting as it is exhaustive. So in these chapters, I follow the materiality of key techniques in the production and programming of big city space. By production,

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