

## UKNA Call for Papers Thematic Group 2: “Cities by and for the People”

What are possible alternative spaces in the city, and how do they come together to reflect a city by and for the people? The flow of global assembly work to Asian cities since the 1970s began to alter peripheral urban landscapes to facilitate large industrial economic zones. This triggered waves of urbanisation from the countryside in search of perceived better livelihoods in rapidly growing cities. By the late 1980s finance capital a new consumptive lifestyles arrived along with the increase of disposable income and people's participation in the global economy. From this point on, the urban core experienced thorough transformations through privatisation of urban spaces for mega-projects ranging from shopping malls to world business hubs and the world's tallest buildings. Large-scale gated housing and private new towns began to occupy agricultural land in peri-urban areas.

Cities that had fewer than 1 million residents in 1970 grew to as much as 30 million within a short space of 3 decades of globalisation and the new international division of labour. Along with this growth and change came new urban lifestyles, widening social differences and disparities, as countries become more complexly urban. The attention given by commercial interests and governments to new lifestyles and global consumption diverted urban development discourse away from attention to the loss of public spaces, vernacular landscapes and from building meaningful urban neighbourhoods and communities.

This urban development trajectory reflects a process of consciously forgetting that the city is a theatre of social action filled with social drama that consist of politics, education, and commerce that are richly significant in everyday life (Mumford, 1937; Jacobs, 1961). Inequalities and uncertainties have grown together with the urban population and diversity in today's megacities (Simone and Rao, 2012). The widening social divides and the persistence of very low-income employment and inadequate housing (“slums”) in cities experiencing annual high rates of economic growth over several decades revealed that the role of cities as generators of increased prosperity for all and as new forms of egalitarian civilisation was not occurring as portrayed in the earlier Western cities-based theories (McGee, 1974; Armstrong and McGee, 2007; Evers and Korff, 2001).

For these reasons, redefining and reiterating the idea of the city in urban theory is essential for connecting epistemologies with current urban experiences. Redefining the idea of the city essentially means revisiting the right of people to be principal agents in constructing urban spaces, both socially and physically. Such a reconceptualisation would include but also go beyond economy and material aspects of what is summarised as “development” to include other important elements of human flourishing that arise from the conviviality of associational and public life, and capabilities for creative expressions of individual ideas, talents and aspirations.

Despite increasing corporatisation of cities, efforts in countering the alienating forces of capitalist urban growth continue to be asserted through both non-violent insurgencies and cooperative projects for alternative development pathways. Resistance movements against corporatisation and privatisation of public institutions and spaces, socially unjust economies, evictions and dispossessions and environmental destruction, among many others, are gaining in numbers of participants everywhere. Practices of producing urban space, which are simultaneously physical and social processes, are observable and may help in theoretically defining the ‘people’ who could (and should) build the city. Local initiatives in neighbourhoods and districts, including managing and governing them, are key manifestations of an inclusive city by and for the people. In urban and peri-urban areas people are engaging in the self-provisioning of food in community gardens both as a matter of having healthy alternatives and in response to rising costs of industrial food. Some have spread throughout the city and to other urban areas. Several cities in Asia has also begun participatory budgeting in which district residents are involved in identifying problems that needs to be rectified in their localities. In some countries, communities are printing and using their own currency as a way to enhance synergistic economic linkages within them. Other communities are adopting collective tenure as a means to prevent land speculation and gentrification.



In an increasingly multi-cultural world in which international as well as intranational migrations are fuelling the growth of cities throughout Asia, an inclusive society cannot limit the idea of “cities by and for the people” to citizens or legal residents, but will instead be judged by the ways in which it creates the city as Cosmopolis that welcomes the stranger. In Asia today migrant workers receive incomes well below those of citizens, are quickly disposable, have exceptionally limited rights to collective consumption and to the city, and are not in line to become either permanent resident or citizen of the city or nation. In these circumstances, the idea of the city and the epistemologies used to understand the urban condition require greater appreciation of the ways in which cities can accommodate and thrive from social, ethnic and cultural diversity, which appears to be one of the greatest urban challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

“Cities by and for the People” asks epistemological as well as action-based questions in exploring possible alternatives to construct cities as theatres of social action. The following are research questions that outline the theme:

### Possibilities for Alternatives

- What are the forms of urban projects by and for the people and how would these urban projects reflect the city as both idea and reality?
- How do people’s roles in these projects – often place-making practices – reveal their position in the construction of the city as a contextual reality?
- What are the historical, cultural, political, and social contexts within which alternative development projects arise and prove to be successful?
- How are spaces for alternative development obtained or appropriated, and how are these spaces sustained?
- How are urban projects by and for the people governed and managed?
- What are the potentials to (re-)create the commons in an urban setting?
- What are the workable scales of these projects?
- Can such new tools as collective forms of tenure, community currency, and social enterprises in Asian cities provide a way to build the right to the city from neighbourhood and grassroots levels upward? What are the chances that these mechanisms can prevail in the longer term?
- What are the positions of the state and the private corporate sectors in these projects vis-à-vis the people who create and maintain them?
- What are the key drivers for success in maintaining public spaces for people’s associational and public life?
- What are the characteristics of public spaces that provide senses of personal efficacy to the people?
- How do public spaces enable people to continuously recalibrate skills to build social relationships and social capital?



## Constructing Urban Theories

- What are the theoretical bases and useful conceptual tools to generate ideas about cities by and for the people?
- What brings together urban heterogeneities as social agents of change in the city?
- What are the material traits of cities and urban societies that inspire communities to collaborate and take action for a common good?
- What are the ideological resources for these collaborative actions?
- What prevents people in the city to work together to build a progressive city?
- How applicable is the right to the city as a conceptual framework in defining and practicing cities by and for the people?
- What are collective rights?
- What distinguishes them from individual rights?
- How is 'collective' defined?
- How do we understand the local state (municipal or urban level) in relation to the idea of the city by and for the people?
- Are some local states within a given society more progressive in adopting inclusive forms of governance?
- If so, how do such governments emerge?
- Are the various coalitions that produce such local governments durable or ephemeral?
- How can progressive forms of governance needed in support of grassroots initiatives for alternative development be sustained?

## Research Outputs

- Cities by and for the People envision academic outputs such as books and journal publications, but it is also open to the following possible outputs:
- Documentary films on urban spaces by and for the people, which portrays the image of the city as constructed by the people.
- Policy papers for social movements in the city. These policy papers offer ideas and strategies for progressive cities by and for the people.
- Archives of urban social movements to preserve political memories of people as agents of change in various Asian cities. These archives should be coded and preferably feed into the epistemological part of the thematic group.
- Blogs as platforms to share updates on case studies in Asia
- Student design competitions to encourage out-of-the-box architectural research and designs that promotes the city by and for the people, which supports human flourishing of its residents.

