



An introduction to “ Beyond the City: New Urban Definitions ”

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AN INTRODUCTION TO
«BEYOND THE CITY: NEW URBAN
DEFINITIONS»

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One fundamental definition that has influenced much of our current world organization is that of “city.” Certain definitions of city, closely linked to land use and property, serve as a foundation for the modern organization of the world’s societies, economies and political systems. This modern organization also brought about a cultural divide between city and countryside, as well as a developmental divide that often sustains asymmetrical development paths and uneven socio-ecological interactions. Formal, informal, ruled, desired and imagined conceptions of the city contribute to this process. As the global human population steadily becomes more urbanized, as cities become central to regulate socio-ecological interactions, and as the limits, functions and definitions of cities become increasingly blurred, it is opportune to revisit what we understand by city.

Along these lines, this edition aims to reframe the notions of city and the non-city, through a comprehensive debate about cities, what lies beyond cities, and what can be considered a non-city. In responding to this invitation, the contributors deal with questions that pervade the very existence of cities beyond generic administrative or official definitions. From varied disciplinary viewpoints the articles address relevant questions about why and how



cities maintained their existence in the past and what cities ought to become in order to survive in the future. A recurrent line of reasoning in this collection is that the existence of cities depends intrinsically upon the separation between cities and the non-city. While this rationale lacks a clear-cut innovative component, these contributions have, nevertheless, enlightened new interdisciplinary approaches and fresh perspectives on the topic, and offer analysis of cases rarely dealt with in the literature. Moreover, the contributions highlight the city's existence as a permanent process of negotiation with what is considered to be different at various moments in history, and encourage us to take a long-term vision of the city in the future.

In this vein, Diaz Sancho demonstrates how urban dwellers in Japan maintained a discursive control over the symbolic transformation of the Musashino landscape from the eighth century onwards. Originally woodlands, Musashino was gradually turned into a plain as human settlements started to appear there in the Jōmon era (circa 14000-300 B. C.). The reed covered plains where violets had never previously bloomed were beautifully described as “a prairie of wild herbs” or “a violet prairie,” in the writings of poets living in Heijō-kyō (Nara) and Heian-kyō (Kyoto), the Southern and Northern capital cities. This imagined landscape was subsequently transformed into a “vast and endless plain” and finally achieved its fame as “a traditional moon-viewing site” appreciated by the Edo (Tokyo) inhabitants. The ancient Japanese feared the wild woods and celebrated the beauty of the plains, but from the Meiji era the modern inhabitants of Tokyo considered the manmade arboretum and vast agricultural fields of the area as idyllic “natural landscapes.” Over time, the symbolic existence of this far-away idealized “natural landscape” served to legitimize the urbanity of Japanese cities, even if the imagined landscapes of Musashino were constructed from the perspective of city inhabitants, as naturalist writer Kunikida Doppo observed in 1901 when he wrote that “Tokyo is in the center of Musashino”.

In raising our sensitivity to this process of internal and external symbolic construction, Duarte calls for an aesthetic appreciation of the urban style. She argues that a deep consideration of the nature of an urban style suggests that cities must exist for urbanity to emerge, but not everything that exists in cities is urban. Moreover, the author claims that for the urban to exist, the presence



of inhabitants in cities is not enough on its own. Rather, city dwellers must practice the urban in their daily lives, in a process where the urban builds and rebuilds the cities' inhabitants, at the same time as they build and rebuild the urban. Consequently, urban style has a dynamic rhythm and movement that gains form, in contrast to that which is not urban, both inside and outside cities.

Duarte's contribution allows us to infer that the ancient Japanese capitals were built from the outset to be cities with marked urban features. As Faure demonstrates, the ancient capital Kyoto (Heian-kyô) was built in the eighth century as a fortress to keep the peace and protect its inhabitants. Thus, any catastrophe that might disturb daily life in the urban capital, including epidemics, famine, rebellions, floods, or the death of senior officials, would be kept outside the city. Faure shows how the capital's planners and administrators attempted several idealizations, measures and interventions to achieve that objective, by for example, recognizing specific topographic and geographic features that take into consideration pragmatic aspects of the river course and the existing location of villages in the Yamashiro basin, or by replacing ideal geomantic landform elements with symbolic elements from the garden-making manual, *Sakuteiki*. He also affirms that the temples and sanctuaries in the city's surroundings were lined up to create an invisible barricade against external evils, and the Rashômon, one of the main gates to the city, was erected in the midst of an empty wall-less space. Other mentions of the capital's gates live on in its toponyms, such as Kuramaguchi (Mt. Kurama gate) and Tambaguchi (Gateway to Tamba Province), which survived later attempts to enclose the city motivated by a persistent desire to separate the Rakuchû and Rakugai – the interior and exterior of the city – in order to maintain order, peace and well-being in the daily life of the capital.

Efforts to keep past evils outside city limits, in contrast, later witnessed the arrival of the modern city evils, which spurred the appearance of an intermediary interior/exterior solution in the form of suburbs. Looking at this specific type of space and location of urban expansion, Serre et al. point to the historical transformations occurring in European suburban areas. Suburbs are described as diffused city; emerging city; in-between city; neither urban nor rural territory; city-territory; city-nature; or polycentric city. When they first



appeared, suburbs represented a model of a prosperous and developed way of life; now they are criticized for the environmental impact of urban sprawl, the social homogeneity and individualism of their residents, and a general lack of architectural quality and urban form. In response to this criticism, these authors draw on examples from Denmark, Belgium and France to highlight attempts to change the environmental and social features of suburbs, by improving their functionality and density in order to mimic central cities. The article considers suburbs as unfinished urban spaces that are able to incorporate sustainable development principles and may be remodeled to attend to future demands.

In the following discussion, Meyer describes how twentieth-century urbanization across the world mainly advanced from cities out to their external areas in a centrifugal process. This type of urbanization moved away from the city limits, towards suburban areas and peripheries, leading to processes of conurbation and metropolization that emerged from and were shaped to resemble existing cities or as a reaction to them. However, Meyer argues that urbanization has now gained an uncontrollable self-vitality that has disrupted the formal and functional attributes of former cities. This indivisible process of urbanization that some authors call “super-urban” supports the emergence of what others refer to as the post-city way of living. According to Meyer, today’s urbanization process impacts cities through a centripetal influence that obliges formerly consolidated cities to adapt to the needs of unlimited urbanization. She asserts that many of the instruments and concepts formulated to date to build and maintain cities have started to collapse following the arrival of this new phenomenon that disregards cities’ limits and definitions. Consequently, twenty-first century urbanization is now reshaping cities and continues to push further away activities that have historically been expelled from the heart of modern cities.

This is the case of agricultural activities. In a complementary strand of thinking, Jayo and Caldas explore examples of counter-efforts to bring back agricultural activities to the core of cities. The authors describe the abundant records of agricultural cultivation that previously went on in inner city areas. However, the densification of modern cities led to the gradual transfer of agriculture to more distant areas, and metropolitan urbanization compounded



this effect through market-led processes that expelled agricultural activity from urban peripheries. In response, since the 1980s there has been a growing interest in bringing agriculture back into the inner cities. Jayo and Caldas show how, in the case of Sao Paulo State and City, the discourses supporting this return have changed over time. The discourse promoting city agriculture shifted from a community, food security and nutrition rationale, to one of an official welfare apparatus aimed to support public health and environmental policies, among others, which have recently attracted academic and private interest. By separating urban agricultural activities into agriculture of visibility and agriculture of scale, the article differentiates between an agricultural activity valued for its productive capacity and one with a symbolic and aesthetic value, both of which could contribute to improve cities.

The effort to reclaim what has been expelled from or never considered in the symbolic imagination of cities is also present in the article that follows. In a striking line of ethical thinking, Serra invites the reader to look at how social processes are embedded in the material structure of cities. The author describes how materials from all over the world are concentrated in cities, and urges us to consider how cities affect populations of mine workers in distant regions. Focusing on the consumption of ceramic sanitary ware in construction, the author analyses the supply chains and labor demands for mineral extraction from geologically rich regions of the world. More specifically, the article proposes creating a reference index of the number of human deaths related to mineral extraction required to produce ceramic sanitary ware. Serra's article conveniently closes this special edition of *kult-ur*, a journal published in the province of Castellon, one of the centers of ceramic production in Spain, in a country which is described in the text as among those valued for its good mining practices. Throwing down a strong ethical challenge to contractors, buyers, and the general city dweller who uses a bathroom on a daily basis, the author asks: «will city dwellers agree to wash their hands in a basin that perhaps involved the death of another human being?». This article contends that today, cities are constructed on the back of remote regions of the world in a process that links cities and non-cities, regardless of where they might be.



In conclusion, cities crave everything that can be extracted from the material, social and symbolic dimensions of the non-city. Cities are not always urban; urbanization advances by disrupting cities; city dwellers long for peace, health, and prosperity by trying to preserve the virtues of agriculture and rural life; cities are built from the land, minerals, and human bodies of Uzbekistan or South Africa. The rich discussions presented here raise issues that are also valid for analysis in the case of specific regions. In Japan, the endless urbanization is all-pervasive, yet its declining population continues to concentrate in metropolitan areas. Japanese cities have historically densified by subdividing existing land plots to build new houses for younger generations. But the phenomenon of the “akiya” (empty houses) – up to 15% of houses in Kyoto City – and abandoned lots has opened up opportunities to rethink urban agriculture, in a country where 61% of the food consumed comes from abroad, and minerals are imported in vast quantities to supply 84% of the energy needed in cities. All in all, the specific and general questions raised in this collection lend support to the continued renovation of the culture of cities. Framed as a collection of varied languages and disciplines, with examples from different regions of the world, at different moments in history, this compilation has turned out to be an experiment just as cosmopolitan, multifaceted and unexpected as a truly urban experience can be.