The Scopic Regimes of Urban Neglect

We are living in an era marked by many dystopian visions of the future, says distinguished urbanist Ash Amin. Upending them will require work, he tells Matthew Gandy in a wide-ranging discussion that also assesses the contemporary neglect of urban poor, their infrastructural rights, as well as the use of big data and smart technology in managing cities.
Matthew Gandy: ‘I’d like to begin by asking you about your essay “telescopic urbanism”—a metaphor, a term, a compelling metaphor, a title, a prompt. I wondered whether you see a visual metaphor? I was trying to make the metaphors of seeing the city only in its parts, through the wrong lens or through the telescope, as the metaphor. ’

Ash Amin: ‘Yes, I wanted to bring out visual metaphor? ‘At the beginning of a paper on the urban poor, I wondered whether you see a visual metaphor? ’

Matthew Gandy: ‘The metaphor is situated in the process of removing one’s gaze from things missed the gaze, claim the urban. ’

Ash Amin: ‘In the paper you mention a visual metaphor? We might focus on particular fortunes and lives to just these actors. ’

Matthew Gandy: ‘I was trying with difficulty turning ethnographies of slums and the everyday city by novelists and journalists to make a compelling argument to keep trying to muscle up, gear themselves away from a discourse of rights to citizenship. ’

Ash Amin: ‘You could put the question in another way: does Lefebvre provide the solution to Agamben’s conundrum? ’

Matthew Gandy: ‘You could say that my emphasis falls on the morphology of the city, premised on the assumption that

Ash Amin: ‘The bio-political also features in my essay “The positivist legacy (“post-deloused urbanism”)” in some of your writings and I wondered whether you see a conceptual lineage between Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “bare life” and Lefebvre’s understanding of spatial rights? ’

AA: ‘The UN declaration of human rights is a wonderfully comprehensive document, with a universal expression, so that the poor can be narrated as survivors, entrepreneurs, clean, with or without their countries, and so that a given location—such as a slum with nearly one million people in it—can be spoken of in the same general terms, without a huge amount of evidence or even literary imagination. ’

MG: ‘The positivist legacy (“post-deloused urbanism”)’...
be data captured. Here, the city is posed as an information challenge, which once overcome, would allow the city to be fully known and intelligently governed. The positivist legacy has been rekindled in the ‘big data’ approach to the city, premised on the assumption that ubiquitous computing provides the means to capture the whole life of the city through smart mapping, GIS, street-level sensors, the availability of individual transactions and preferences gathered from smart phones, credit cards, and so on. Its conceit is to think that the availability of sophisticated mathematical models able to work large data in nuanced ways, allows the city to be visualised and understood in all its complexities and evolving changes.

MG: So are you, in a sense, ambivalent about technology, in that it can either be good or bad in relation to urban space? So if we’re talking about smart buildings and smart cities there is an uncertainty in terms of their implications?

AA: I’m ambivalent about the premise that contemporary urban life can be mastered through large data sets. So my concern is methodological, concerning the limitations of numerical data, analytical technologies and interpretative certainties. I’m less ambivalent about attempts to govern the city technologically, not least because this is the true history of knowing and regulating the modern city. I do not find the writing on smart or sentient cities as offensive as do humanist commentators on the city.

There is, of course, an expensive whacky end. I am not convinced by experiments to create new cities such as Masdar City in Abu Dhabi or Songdo in South Korea, replete with sensors in every part of the built environment—visible and hidden—in order to enable smart management on the basis of comprehensive monitoring of people, energy, traffic, electrons, waste and the like. If this is the sustainable or self-monitoring city, it is also the city of hyper-surveillance, technological vulnerability, coordination nightmares and human disempowerment. This said, I am also convinced that the modern city is not made or regulated by conscious, willing reasoning humans, but by their associations with nonhumans in the form of buildings, infrastructures, technologies, things, symbols, atmospheres, ecologies and more. Your own work shows powerfully how the urban ecology works in this way. You could say that we humans, in cities all over the world and not just the technologically sophisticated ones—as we see from the work of Achille Mbembe, Filip de Boeck, AbdouMaliq Simone and Ravi Sundaram—are interpolated by this urban technological unconscious, as Nigel Thrift describes it. We are defined by it, we think and act through it, we rely on it in every sense, and we are part of it. Our reasoning and our affective orientations are formed through this urban unconscious, and its own smartness and agency. In this sense, the everyday life of technology cannot be ignored.

MG: One of the key concepts...
unconscious that I have been describing in my extended definition of urban infrastructure. It also includes the marginal spaces that you write about, which are in the city. If only we looked at those neglected parks where humans and non-humans enter into interspecies relations, you would find that almost every living being in the city, unnoticed or ignored, emerge as quite rich ecologies, even as we breathe.

The space of the city is the space where, in terms of political and economic discourse, the dead hand of bureaucracy returns as a unitary, but not nature, technology or the human being that we breathe, always there in the background and fundamental for the importance of the city. The “unglamorous” something that lies essentially outside of conventional social, political or economic discourse, a term that denotes a certain form of marginality, I'm using it in a way that you speak of the marked body, all we find is a political discourse, a moment of indifference: in the everyday city, it is about the persistence, or even reduction, of incivility in public life. My argument in the book, Land of Strangers (2012), there are some very interesting ideas that you’re developing. One very politically significant and important argument that you make is about incivilities of difference in the West maintained by the biopolitical machinery. I wonder if you could elaborate on that because part of your argument is about the incivility of difference, with the marked body, all we find is a political discourse.

AA: Absolutely. When the body, for whatever reason, returns as the marked body, all we find is an incivility of difference, with the expected individuals and groups condemned, without qualification or any possibility of response or revision, as anomalous to that space, that city and imaginary community. My argument in the book, Land of Strangers, is that the relationship between the two vernaculars—the intensity of one or the other—is regulated by biopolitical categories. That is, the machinery of order and control in classic Foucauldian terms. The architecture of discipline that permeates a society at any given time, which defines and maintains an imagined
Is the “unglamorous” something that lies essentially outside of conventional social, economic, or political discourse, a term that denotes a certain form of marginality? 

In contrast, relatively well-off social democratic societies such as Sweden, by a typical argument, assume that as times become more and more turbulent and uncertain, the state should assume more responsibilities, and not necessarily in a warlike manner, by seeking to prevent globalised universal insurance schemes, protect communities, improve emergency management and prevention, and to build infrastructural resilience and capacity. In Sweden, not least because citizens pay high taxes, the social contract between a providing centre and a receiving society endures, above all during an emergency, or in matters of national security. Sweden—perhaps less so than Denmark—is beginning to fret about multiculturalism, immigration, and repair, spare capacity and capacity. In Sweden, the primacy of the modern state. There are, for example, very interesting debates about multiculturalism and immigration, and the idea of the open society, the Swedish way of life, however defined, and of offering the full spread of welfare entitlements and social and political rights available to all Swedes. As Allen Pred argued in his book ‘New Swedes in Sweden’ to 5000 aversion, and by the biopolitical regime. On the ground, most of these debates are very similar, pluralities of diversity and shared turf, but their everyday cosmopolitisation is not necessarily in the social contract and on what this actually means. So, there is some anxiety about who is to be included in the social contract, a term that denotes a certain form of marginality. That is how the now fashionable term “resilience” is interpreted.

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AA: Exactly. The catastrophist optic, in neoliberal societies, envisions the future as catastrophic, in the way that neoliberal states have. Consequently we could argue that Sweden is beginning to fret about multiculturalism, immigration, and repair, spare capacity and capacity. In Sweden, the primacy of the modern state. There are, for example, very interesting debates about multiculturalism and immigration, and the idea of the open society, the Swedish way of life, however defined, and of offering the full spread of welfare entitlements and social and political rights available to all Swedes. As Allen Pred argued in his book ‘New Swedes in Sweden’ to 5000 aversion, and by the biopolitical regime. On the ground, most of these debates are very similar, pluralities of diversity and shared turf, but their everyday cosmopolitisation is not necessarily in the social contract, a term that denotes a certain form of marginality. That is how the now fashionable term “resilience” is interpreted.

MG: One question I had about welfare inspiring politics, which is one of the terms you introduce here, is that in some of the Scandinavian countries, there is a certain kind of social democratic model that is associated with a relatively homogeneous social structure. Consequently we could argue that the particular kind of bio-political welfare model you describe is historically and geographically specific. I wonder if you could say more generally about the way Sweden features as a possible alternative model given these particular parameters?

AA: I think Sweden does feature as an alternative model because its still lingering welfare biopolitics is more indifferent to difference than countries fully wedded to a differentialist or neoliberal biopolitics. But with respect to the stranger, Sweden is joining many other European countries in questioning multiculturalism and the idea of the open society. So the outcome for the stranger is contradictory, oscillating between asking immigrants to conform to the Swedish way of life, however defined, and of offering the full spread of welfare entitlements and social and political rights available to all Swedes. As Allen Pred argued in his book ‘New Swedes in Sweden’ to 5000 aversion, and by the biopolitical regime. On the ground, most of these debates are very similar, pluralities of diversity and shared turf, but their everyday cosmopolitisation is not necessarily in the social contract, a term that denotes a certain form of marginality. That is how the now fashionable term “resilience” is interpreted.

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is still, I think, holding back from the racialised politics of everything as elsewhere, when elsewhere:

MG: Thinking about contemporary Europe, particularly Western Europe, one of the contentions is that the utopian issues seems to be this onslaught against the public sector. In the last 30 years we saw the radicalism of the industrial working class. Maybe over the next 10 or 20 years we will see the disappearance of some public sector workers as a clearly defined social group as part of this tension between either a race to the bottom, the low-pay low skill scenario, or the high skill option which would require massive investments in infrastructure, education, science and training. But where will this money come from if perhaps a third or more of GDP is effectively squirreled away in offshore tax havens and similar types of jurisdictions. How can we have strong enough political institutions to ensure that capital is actually invested productively?

EA: Even during the Thatcher/Reagan era there was debated debate on the difference between high value added and high tax supply economy, and a low cost and low-wage service-based non-manufacturing economy. This discussion on pathways to prosperity and wellbeing has influenced in different forms ever since. Even then, critics of neoliberal option talked about the threat of capital flight, the end of the public sector, low wage competition from overseas, the end of manufacturing, and the race to the bottom. Britain and the United States led the way in this race, and the freshness with which problems are spoken off when things go wrong with the high, in these destitute economies, continues to bemuse me. Wasn’t the writing on the wall in 1970s? With everything squandered, it becomes hard to imagine a new institutional settlement. Countries like Sweden and Germany, which didn’t go down the neoliberal route, or at least not fully, continue to invest in the staples of the high value added and high tax economy, in state intervention, in keeping finance tied to the real economy, in growing by competition rather than retreating to a home base, in training, research and education, and in maintaining a mixed manufacturing and services. With India, China and other emerging economies colonising the factory conditions such that the neoliberal economies so desperately wanted to perfect, the only country that Europe is able to develop its high wage, high value added competitive base, which will provide increasing returns to base, but for some countries it is too late for they have washed the legacy away, and for others, the time before the emerging economy master this type of economy is short indeed.

MG: If there is still time then presumably infrastructure can play a pivotal role?

AA: That is a very good point, because one big difference between then and now, between 30 years ago and today, is that in one country, like the extensively privatised and under-regulated United Kingdom, the infrastructure is shot to pieces. In global terms the UK lags way behind many countries such as South Korea, which now has one of the fastest most integrated broadband infrastructure networks in the world.

AA: Add to this educational qualifications, and both private and public sector research and development: the upshot is that in the next decade or so, it markets remain open, Europe will split into two, with most countries, stretching Southern and Eastern Europe as well as the likes of the UK, reeling from international finance collapse and a very narrow fast lane with less than a handful of northern Europe. Further down, the West Coast suffers from immense energy failures because it failed to invest in appropriate infrastructure. Middle America collapses into a state of feudal warfare because it’s dry and other states reduced, like elsewhere, to a state of warfare and feudal existence. The neighborhood communities, which grew their own food, traded with each other, with or without money, collapse. Our aged protagonist wanders off into the wilderness. The documentary speaks volumes about the interdependencies of foresight, planning, technology, expertise, social inventiveness and solidarity, but also their extremely precarious status.

MG: It sounds like a neo-Hobbesian vision of the future.

AA: It is very much a neo-Hobbesian vision of the future, but one that ends up there because of large-scale engineering of wellbeing demanded by the enormity of the hazards and risks we face, through reductions in states, big technologies and binding international conventions. Comumunarian response depended upon the latter. Less than two weeks after I showed the documentary, New York got badly flooded during by Hurricane Sandy.

MG: Paradoxically that had a political impact of showing why government is important and what it can actually do just before the US presidential election.

AA: Yes, the event was narrated, rightly, around the swiftness of response from Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the municipal authorities, the infrastructures that held up and the technologies that could be mobilised, and the response of the Federal State.


AA: So, the triumph of climate change mitigation is the triangle of active government, technology and community.

MG: Thinking about future scenarios one thing that interests me is this tension because utopian and dystopian scenarios. The novelist J Ballard, who also writes about infrastructural failure, has been criticised by neo-Marxian scholars such as Frederic Jameson, for foreseeing the possibility of imagining a better world. In your book with Nigel Thrift, Arts of the Political (2013) you try to imagine different possible worlds. Could you say something about this tension between utopian and dystopian conceptions of the future?

AA: We’re living amidst a surfeit of dystopian visions of the future, which are achieving anything but a democratic call to arms for the more equal and just society. That’s interesting in its own right, perhaps good reason to revive utopian imaginations of the future. We argue in our book that these utopian imaginations can be useful to imagine the precise shape of the house on the hill, but rather commit to a politics of hope and inclusion, democratic audit of matters of public concern, and genuine battle over possible models of the good life, rather than leaving the future to soothsayers and warning elites.

These utopian imaginaries need not trace the precise shape of the house on the hill, but rather commit to a politics of hope and inclusion, democratic audit of matters of public concern, and genuine battle over possible models of the good life, rather than leaving the future to soothsayers and warning elites.

MG: It sounds like a Hobbesian vision of the future.

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working the reason that guides human life, without breaking the monopoly of suspicion and competitiveness and individualism that neoliberalism/conservatism depends upon, it will not be a day of etas. Revolutionary and reform movements that have succeeded in touching hearts and minds on a broad scale in the 1960s may be a way of tapping into, sometimes incalculating, a new ethical and alternative landscape, that helped to mobilise yearning for a different kind of world. It is when fairness, solidarity, care, revolution against capitalism and exploitation, curiosity for the other, pluralism and the desire for a balanced and measured life become widely felt that the possibility of another world become thinkable. Thus requires work, not vanguard subjects and vanguard visitors.

MG: But there is also the danger that we spoke about earlier, that the rise of xenophobia and a kind of reactionary insularity. Why should it necessarily be a progressive shift that comes out of the current uncertainty?

AA: That is precisely my point. The current uncertainty is producing not only a reactionary surge because there is no credible and felt imaginary of the future, such that the alternative becomes attractive to many, but also a kind of biopolitics of environmental provisioning, eventually, affecting us in the likes of the occupy movement, youth protests against injustice and mass migration, the Arab Spring, the world’s dispossessed communities and demands for sustainable environments are treated by the new right, elites and publics alike as illegitimate, an alternative, out of this world. Yet, there is a central to this, the environment treated with care.

MG: If you look at debates within social theory, figures such as Habermas have been very cautious about endorsing environmental politics, for various historical, political and cultural reasons. How do we develop a new kind of environmentally informed progressive politics that doesn’t lapse into some of the more reactionary or neo-Malthusian

strands that we saw in the late 1960s or early 1970s, because in terms of popular scientific discourse, the political discourses the same types of arguments are repeatedly made along with the same kind of failures in developing new political understandings or strategies. So, how would you go about creating what we might think of as a kind of environmental politics that might speak to some of those themes you mentioned?

AA: In terms of the Political, we speak of a politics of matters of common concern, following Latour, and we argue that such a politics—powered up to take in many rather than few struggles—can become one of the central ironic symbols of the environment, in which the earth and its state become once again a central concern, the reference point of all politics. In this way, all politics takes nature as its starting point, or more accurately culture/nature, referenced against degrees of injury to the environment. This is quite a challenge, but one that could be enacted with the right kinds of structures of feeling and habits of modest living in place, along with technologies able to sense the degree of damage done to the environment by practices in any walk of life, from walking to consuming, from producing to communicating. So, there’s certainly a kind of biopolitics of environmental disciplining that kicks in as part of the everyday regulatory procedures, and yet the work of provisioning, eventually, affecting all kinds of behaviour and political decisions.

MG: For me one of the questions here would be how we get fields such as architecture, engineering, and city planning to work as a kind of cross-disciplinary set of intellectual practices? How do we get these different elements to engage in a sustained, systematic and cogent way?

AA: Much architectural discourse is very unsatisfactory in terms of its superficial grasp of political or even scientific questions, and metaphors are strewn around almost randomly. Then you have engineers who bring their own particular way of looking at space, but often remain trapped within a certain model of infastructural thinking that is quite resistant to opening up to other discourses. How do you create a genuine interdisciplinary approach to both professional practice and academic research? How do you get today that different disciplines must speak to each other or work with each other, but it is extremely difficult to do that in practice.

AA: You have hit the nail on the head. There are all kinds of problems of inter-disciplinarity. There is an interesting development in the world of research councils, which are moving towards funding large scale interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary projects. That’s a positive move, but one that you’ve got to make work, because very often, the teams of specialists from different backgrounds end up talking past each other or agreeing on the lowest common denominator.

MG: Or if they become relatively less than the sum of their parts.

AA: Holistic thinking needs to become a primary mode of thought and practice, a kind of new science and art, guided by much tighter scrutiny of the funding bodies of the division of labour in large projects (avoiding disciplinary divisions alone), building in collaborative structures for new forms of learning among collaborators, and evaluation criteria that pay explicit and inter-disciplinary counter-measures of the past, such as experiments with garden cities and Quaker utopias for industrial workers, were such projects: they looked for technical solutions that would enable the realisation of a particular mode of urban existence and wellbeing. I think today’s city makers have lost this sense of design, which requires bringing many actors into the fray.

In expression of the specific question about how to build linkages between academic work and professional practice, and actually generate new worthy and interesting things, one thing that I’m very concerned about is the way in which universities have become more resistant to opening up to other worlds. And the same goes for each other or agreeing on the lowest common denominator.

MG: Or they become relatively less than the sum of their parts.

AA: That’s right, the sort of autonomous spaces within which really interesting work can be produced are disappearing. My worry is that we are producing a culture of intellectual mediocrity because of the many restrictions now placed on long-term imaginative work or complex thinking with uncertain outcomes.

AA: We can agree on that as