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Cities of the Future? Megacities and the Space/Time of Urban Modernity

Austin Zeiderman

This essay examines the popular representation of megacities as “cities of the future.” It argues that rather than remapping the familiar, Eurocentric geography of urban modernity, this discourse reasserts relations between historical time and geographical space that remain centered in Europe and North America. By focusing on one of the so-called “megacities of the Third World” (Bogotá, Colombia), this essay also considers what kinds of governmental projects the discourse on the megacity inspires and enables. It then concludes with the provocation to imagine forms of urban theory and practice that challenge the imagined spatial and temporal coordinates on which these projections of urban futurity are based.

Introduction

At the end of the millennium, representations of megacities began to circulate widely. The burgeoning metropolises of the global South became increasingly the focus of intense interest. As we often now hear, the urban population of the planet is about to outnumber the rural, and cities, it is predicted, will absorb nearly all additional world population growth. Yet it is not the “global” or “world” cities (Sassen 2001; Taylor 2004)—the command and control nodes of the global economy—that are expected to host this demographic explosion, but rather the “big but not powerful” megacities of the Third World (Massey 1999, 115; cited in Robinson 2002, 540).¹ The metropolitan centers that once represented for much of the world the imagined future of modernity—London and Paris in the nineteenth century, New York and Tokyo in the twentieth—are now widely seen as relics of the past. These model cities of the modern era now appear as anachronistic bygonees, while places like São Paulo and Bombay seem to presage what is to come. According to some calculations, 27 of the 33 urban agglomerations predicted to dominate the global cityscape within ten years will be located in the least developed countries (Global Urban Observatory; cited in Koolhaas et al. 2001, 6). We often hear that more than one billion people now live in the urban slums and shantytowns of the global South, and this is where the majority of world population growth will take place. In the twenty-first century, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the expanding megacities of over 8 to 10 million inhabitants, and the astounding hypercities of 20 million or more, have become the new “cities of the future.”

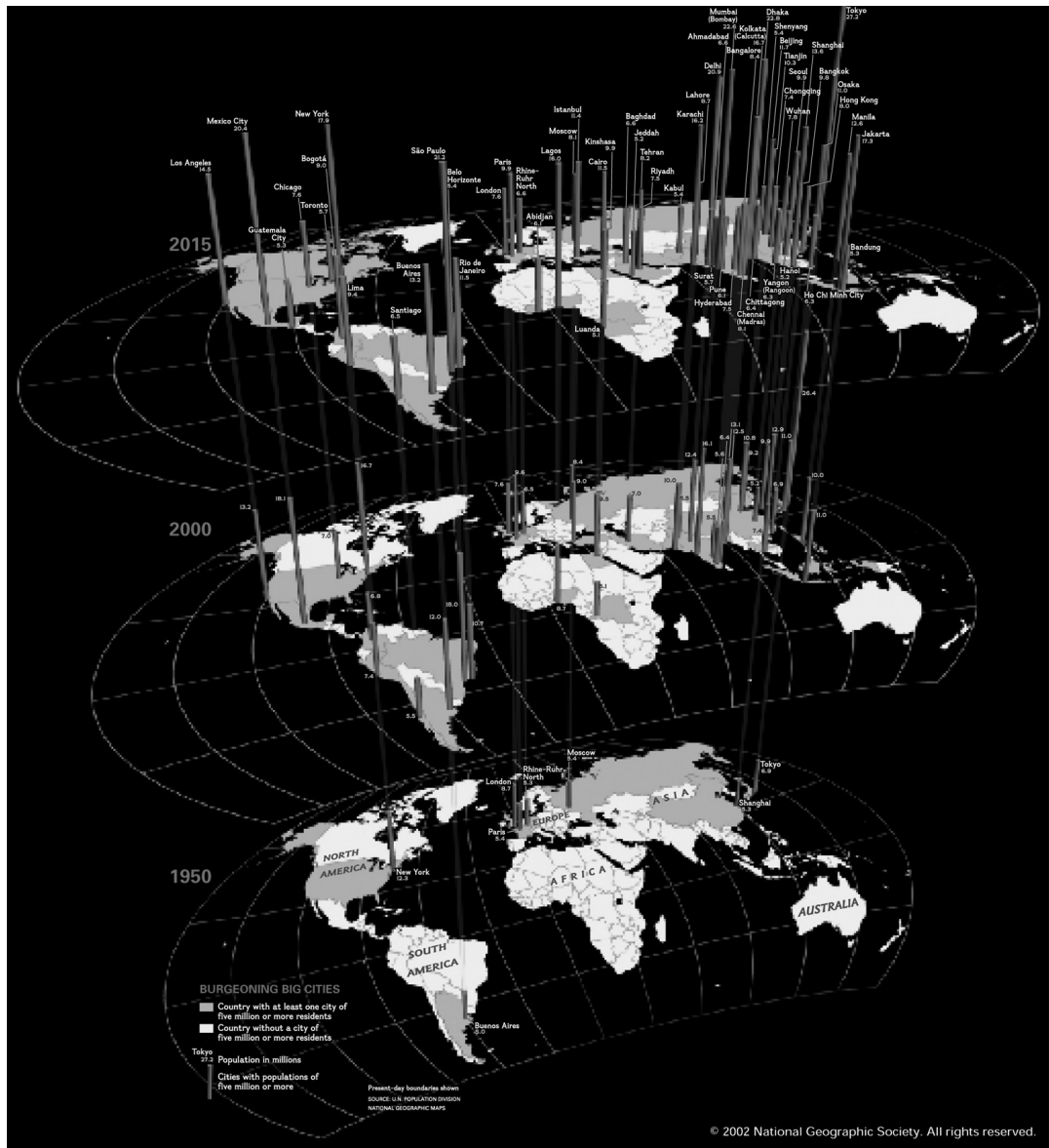
The goal of this essay is to examine the “megacity” as a category emanating primarily from within the global North to denote the rapidly-growing metropolises of the global South. After reviewing popular representations of megacities as “cities of the future,” it will analyze this trend through the critical lens of postcolonial theory, which will allow for a discussion of the global order envisioned by this discourse. At first glance, framing the world by transferring the title “cities of the future” from modern cities to megacities seems to radically rearrange a familiar, Eurocentric relationship between history and geography. However, in what follows, I aim to show instead that it reinscribes the place of the West in the global order by reasserting relations between historical time and geographical space that remain centered in Europe and North America—yet with a disturbing twist. Sensitized to the semantics of the “megacity,” we can then examine what work is being done in its name; a focus on one of the so-called “megacities of the Third World” (Bogotá, Colombia) enables us to consider with more clarity and precision what the discourse on the megacity does: what kinds of governmental projects does it inspire and enable? The essay concludes with questions that indicate the need to re-conceptualize such views of cities of the global South in order to make way for an urban theory and practice that unravels and eludes the spatial and temporal coordinates that have been fundamental to dominant notions of urban modernity and, by extension, Euro-American hegemony.

Urban Futurity: Global Projections, Local Anxieties

The idea that megacities of the global South are the “cities of the future” is compelling. And, indeed, it has succeeded in capturing the imagination of a wide range of urbanist commentators in Europe and North America. Their publications claim to offer their readership, for the most part also located in the West, a view from which to envision the world’s cities in the decades to come. Consider, as a starting point, a world map published by National Geographic magazine in 2002 as part of a special feature on megacities (Zwingle 2002). This startling map (Figure 1) helps the viewer visualize, thanks to clever graphic design, the magnitude of recent demographic predictions. But this vision of the future is jarring, not only for its dramatic depiction of explosive population growth, but also for the fact that it upends the most familiar of cartographic representations. It positions the viewer below the equator, below the Tropic of Capricorn even, and looking upwards—that is to say, it offers Northern eyes a view from the South. The perspective it offers, of course, stands in direct opposition to the familiar Mercator projection, which famously exaggerated the size of the temperate land areas relative to the tropics. Whereas with the Mercator projection, Europe grew to twice its true size relative to countries near the equator and the African continent shrunk ten-fold to the size of Greenland (Snyder 1993, 48), in National Geographic’s future-oriented image of the world, it is the megacities of the global South that loom large.

Such a view is reinforced by the proliferation of cultural productions in the West that take place in or focus on megacities, which novelist and critic Rana

Figure 1: Projection of the “cities of the future.” Map courtesy of the National Geographic Society, used with permission.



Dasgupta interprets as follows: “the Third-World metropolis is becoming the symbol of the ‘new’... If, for the better part of the 20th century, it was New York and its glistening imitations that symbolized the future, it is now the stacked-up, sprawling, impromptu city-countries of the Third World” (2006). Referring to the fear and fascination such megacity spectacles arouse in Western audiences, Dasgupta surmises that what First-World eyes see in films like *City of God* (Rio de Janeiro), *The Constant Gardener* (Nairobi), and *Tsotsi* (Soweto, Johannesburg) is what they believe will become increasingly familiar to them at home in years to come: “Perhaps the Third-World city is more than simply the source of the things that will define the future, but actually is the future of the western city.”

At first glance, envisioning the world in this manner seems to disrupt representations central to the durable fiction of European superiority. (In the case of the map, it seems quite literally to stand them on their head.) Others commentators discussing the portentous nature of megacities appear to do the same. For example, the influential urbanist Mike Davis, in his book *Planet of Slums*, argues, “the cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood” (2006, 19). Likewise, journalist Robert Neuwirth (2005), reporting on squatter settlements in megacities of four continents, sees them as visions of the “new urban world.” However, where Neuwirth finds optimism in a future of industrious squatters building lasting communities in the most adverse and precarious conditions, Davis sees a truly horrific global transformation: “Instead of cities of

light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay” (2006, 19). Although seeing megacities as “cities of the future” may pose a new challenge to commonly held histories and geographies of urban modernity, Davis’s Third World dystopia has a long legacy. For centuries, North American and European (or, more broadly, modernist) aesthetic sensibilities have been appalled by the “crowds, dirt, and disease” they encountered in the non-Western city (Chakrabarty 2002, 65-79).

As geographer Matthew Gandy notes, there are two dominant modes of analysis and interpretation of the megacity: alarmist predictions of urban apocalypse discovered in the misery of the slums and hopeful models of a new urbanism found in the ingenuity of informal markets and settlements (2005, 38-40). But while the megacity is sometimes discussed in a positive, even romantic, light, more often it is seen as the cause for alarm. Megacities are commonly indexed as sites of explosive population growth and massive concentration of poverty, and these conditions are seen to be exacerbated by the peril of environmental deterioration and natural disaster. Jonathan Anjaria (Forthcoming) notes how commentators of diverse political positions, such as Mike Davis and Robert Kaplan, share the same view of cities of the global South as failures. In line with Davis’s vision, cited above, Kaplan finds, in the cities of West Africa, “the symbol of worldwide demographic, environmental, and societal stress” (1994, 46). And Kaplan, like Davis, foresees disaster eventually coming “home.” These cities, he argues, are “an appropriate introduction to the issues, often extremely unpleasant to discuss, that will soon confront our civilization” (Kaplan 1994, 46, my emphasis).

This compounded anxiety—a dystopia that is not just “over there,” but one that will soon be “over here”—has become almost routine in discussions of megacities. In 2005, a popular environmental magazine added its voice to the chorus by publishing a cover story entitled “Cities of the Future” (Montavalli et al. 2005). It, too, argues that the West must look to megacities like Jakarta, Dhaka, and Lagos as predictors of the living conditions for the majority of the earth’s population in the twenty-first century. And the authors’ intent is also to draw the attention of the North to the chronic disasters of megacities, all of which suffer from “a catalog of environmental ills” the article goes on to describe (Montavalli et al. 2005, 29). Likewise, left-leaning periodicals targeted at critical intellectuals, when focusing on megacities, tend to conjur worldwide urban futures of crisis, chaos, and collapse. A recent article in Harper’s Magazine concurs: “metropolitan Manila...in its poverty, enormity, utter squalor, and lack of services perfectly represents the catastrophic twenty-first-century vision of the megacity” (Power 2006, 57). In a similar vein, the caption beneath a two-page photograph in *The New Yorker*, of women living in the Lagos city dump, reads: “Lagos has become the archetype of the megacity, perhaps because its growth has been so explosive, perhaps because its cityscape has become so apocalyptic” (Packer 2006, 62-3).

Whether these forecasts have utopian or dystopian inflections, what ultimately concerns me here is their shared sense of global transformation, in which the megacity slum is the paradigmatic urban space of the twenty-first century. As world-renowned architect Rem Koolhaas says of Africa’s largest megacity: “Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos” (Koolhaas et al.

2001, 653; cited in Ferguson 2007, 75). Given the ubiquity of this view, we need to ask, according to what relationships between history and geography, between time and space, do megacities and their slums take on such proleptic roles? What is at stake in claiming that familiar developmental narratives have collapsed, such that places once thought to be advancing towards the so-called great modern cities of Europe and the United States have now come to represent to the North its own future?

Reordering the Space/Time of Urban Modernity?

As I have already suggested, initially, one may be tempted to view this discourse as a radical reordering of the presumed relationship between history and geography so central to European modernity—a shift that would reflect, in cultural terms, the waning political and economic power of Western (or, at the present moment, American) imperialism.² It might then constitute a postcolonial critique par excellence by scrambling these imagined spatiotemporal coordinates and displacing the positions of the Third and First Worlds. However, the argument I wish to make is that, paradoxically, this discourse reinscribes and reinforces, even as it seems to rearrange and challenge, the historical logic and geographical order that has been central to the staging of modernity in the West. And, as I hope will soon become clear, it does so with a disturbing twist: within this discourse, developmental promises are now rendered obsolete, the order in which cities of rich and poor countries are expected to converge is inverted, and hopes of development in the South are replaced by fears of degeneration in the North.

Seeing megacities as “cities of the future” expands the boundaries of urban modernity to include places once thought to be either outside of historical time or lagging behind it. Yet this occurs in such a way as to fold other heterogeneous histories into the “global” history of the West, by reorganizing them relative to the West’s own emergence (cf. Mitchell 2000, xxi). As Timothy Mitchell puts it: “Accounts of the modern world that introduce a topsy-turvy view...typically reestablish the order of modernity by removing irregularities...and repositioning them within the West’s uniform and singular history” (2000, 7). Though, in the accounts cited in the previous section, developmental time is obviously unsettled by what anthropologist James Ferguson calls a “nonprogressive re-temporalization” (2006, 192)—that is, history is now believed to be moving “backward” in the direction of Lima and Lagos rather than “forward” towards Paris and New York—the “cities of the future” narrative retains the singular logic of historical time unfolding from one stage to the next. Here, we can expand Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe’s objection to treating the slum as the defining feature of the African metropolis, as it “reinserts the city [of Johannesburg] into a more recognizable frame” (2005, 194).³ With Nuttall and Mbembe, we can ask of the category of the megacity, “doesn’t [it] serve to confirm a dominant North American research mode for carving up the globe?” (2005, 194). The cities of the global North, in this case, remain the hidden referent as the megacity discourse, in Mitchell’s terms, “recaptures histories happening elsewhere and returns them to the historical home of the West” (2000, 12). Simply put, whose future is foreseen in the megacity?⁴

Meanwhile, such a framing allows the current chaos and imminent catastrophe Northern observers see in the cities of the global South to appear as the inevitable culmination of a singular and universally unfolding history. It removes from view the fact that many of these images of “disorder” are actually signs of an uneven geography of wealth and power produced within, not outside of or prior to, histories of global capitalism (King 1990; Harvey 2006). Here, the notion of a linear unfolding of history towards megacities does mystifying work, concealing the extent to which the prosperity of cities of the imperial metropole has often been made possible by exploitative political-economic relations with the colonial periphery. It is true that the “force of history,” as Mitchell calls it, accommodates a reversal of the geography of historical progress and a rejection of the assumption that time always moves in progressive directions (cf. Ferguson 2006). Yet by considering what must be overlooked to fit megacities into the historical time of the West, we see that this discourse ignores histories of capital accumulation and structural underdevelopment by resituating cities of the global South at the static endpoint of a linear, historical narrative centered in Europe and North America.

Imagining these cities to represent the imminent, dystopic future of Northern cities, and to no longer see them as struggling to catch up with the West, is merely a variation on the belief that at any one moment in time places occupy different stages of history. World systems theorists (Wallerstein 1974) and the Latin American dependentista school (Frank 1969; Cardoso and Faletto 1979) argued long ago that a synchronic (or, historical-structural) framework had to undo the “Eurocentric denial of coevalness”

(cf. Fabian 2002) enacted by the U.S.-based ideology of modernization and development (Grosfoguel 2000, 357). These scholars demonstrated that such a paradigm shift was necessary to fully understand the unequal relations between countries, regions, and continents within the global economy, which led to the crucial point that “development and underdevelopment coexist simultaneously in historical time” (Grosfoguel 2000, 360). Paradoxically, the same critique pertains to the idea that megacities are the “cities of the future.” In Gandy’s more contemporary view, in which he applies a similar analysis to the megacity discourse, to see Lagos as the terminal condition of the cities of the First World “is to occlude the fact that every extremity of Lagos’s deterioration over the past quarter century has been linked, in inverse proportion, to the capital accumulated in Chicago, London or Los Angeles” (2005, 42).

Moreover, when history is “re-temporalized” in such nonprogressive ways, cities once thought to be advancing towards modernity are fixed in place within a static global hierarchy (cf. Ferguson 2006, 189). As Ferguson argues: “Once modernity ceases to be understood as a telos, the question of rank is de-developmentalized, and the stark differentiations of the global social system sit raw and naked, no longer softened by the promises of the ‘not yet’” (2006, 186). Accordingly, time is no longer expected to transform poor cities into rich ones, and waiting patiently in anticipation of progress makes little sense. Ferguson points out that something is lost when the modernist “developmental narrative” is seen as a failure and discarded: “no one talks about African economic convergence with the First World anymore” (2006, 183). Likewise, within discussions of megacities, rarely is there talk about Lagos becoming

like London; yet, as some begin to foresee London becoming more like Lagos, the notion of convergence still carries weight—just not in the progressive way it once did. In Ferguson’s view, the re-temporalization of the “global status system” transforms “the nature of the relation between global rich and poor” such that the “key questions are no longer temporal ones of becoming” (2006, 192). Thus, if the status of the megacities of the Third World is fixed, and the cities of the First World foresee in them their own future, then hopes of development in the South morph into fears of degeneration in the North (Ferguson 2006, 189-92). As evidenced by immigration anxieties in North America and Europe, as well as by the worldwide spread of wall-building projects at national borders, the imperative to prevent cities of the global North from becoming “megacities” stimulates the proliferation of numerous technologies of fortressing and exclusion.

A (Mega)City at Risk

The fact that the megacity discourse operates on the scale that it does, focusing on the cities of the South as indicators of a worldwide trend, and yet emanates primarily from North America and Europe, demonstrates its simultaneously globalist aspirations and provincial assumptions (cf. Tsing 2005, 55-80; Chakrabarty 2000).⁵ Though global in scope, the seemingly unlocated discourse of the megacity is always articulated from particular locations: the explosion of interest in the megacity does not come from the megacity—as Walter Mignolo (2005, 35) might say, its “locus of enunciation” is elsewhere.⁶ That said, this globalist discourse often becomes

grounded in particular places. Thus, a discussion of the global order of the megacity discourse would be incomplete without raising the question of what the category does in the world—what concrete and localized projects are enabled by it? If we can see the global city, following geographer Jennifer Robinson (2002, 547), as a normative ideal that encourages calculated projects of city management or “urban entrepreneurialism” (Harvey 1989) that work to attain such a status, we ought to be able to view the megacity as a category that encourages other governmental rationalities, which may have equally important real world effects. Following Robinson’s assertion that the global city is a “regulating fiction” that “can have devastating consequences for most people in the city, especially the poorest” (2002, 547), we must ask: What sorts of projects are inspired and enabled by the “regulating fiction” of the megacity?

Though we can approach this question in a number of ways, the example I will use is a form of urban governance that operates through the techno-politics of risk. In the late twentieth century, as a number of theorists have argued, risk emerged as a rationality of rule and a technology of government tied to a set of political programs aimed at the liberalization of governments, economies, and societies around the world (Dean 1999; Osborne and Rose 1999; Rose 1999). According to Nikolas Rose (1996), in “advanced” liberal democracies,” the state’s active concern for the health and well-being of the population, as well as its commitment to developmental imperatives such as jobs, education, and healthcare, shifted to operations that rational, self-regulating individuals are expected to perform on their own bodies, thoughts, and conduct (Foucault 2003). These insights have drawn attention to governmental efforts that promote

“prudentialism” and personal responsibility for security from hazards, dangers, and risks (O’Malley 1996, 2004). Such diffuse optics are instructive, and yet, if they are focused more sharply, it becomes clear that the spread of risk as a component of neoliberal governmentality throughout cities of the global South, and its relation to the dismantling of the welfare (or, the developmentalist) state, depends on social practices that are made possible by and, in turn, produce certain framings of the world—in particular, an imagination shaped by the megacity discourse and its dystopic fears of chaos, collapse, and catastrophe.

The example of a governmental resettlement project in the city of Bogotá, Colombia, well illustrates this dynamic. In 2003, the municipal government of Bogotá began a program aimed at relocating thousands of informal settlements from what it has officially defined as “zonas de alto riesgo” (or, “zones of high risk”)—peripheral neighborhoods deemed especially vulnerable to hazards such as floods, landslides, and earthquakes (see Figure 2). The precursor to this resettlement program could be traced back to the 1980s, when the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-HABITAT) began to promote risk assessments of informal settlements in megacities throughout the global South.⁷ Bogotá’s resettlement program, however, would not have been possible without the World Bank. Since the beginning, it was aided by the Bank’s financial support and technical expertise, which drew upon a generalized policy for risk reduction and population resettlement in megacities of the developing world (cf. Mejía 1996). In 2006, following years of financial aid and technical advice, the World Bank approved another loan of US\$80 million to the city of Bogotá designated to



Figure 2: The remains of a house located in one of Bogotá's "zones of high risk." The house was recently demolished after its former occupants agreed to participate in the CVP resettlement program. Photograph by Author.

risk management and disaster vulnerability. And the Bank's influence has not been limited to the city of Bogotá: in 2005, it was supporting and guiding 45 similar resettlement programs in megacities across Latin America (Correa and Villegas 2005).⁸

The case of risk and resettlement in Bogotá certainly belongs within the familiar history of relations between Northern development agencies and

Southern governments. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have, for decades, worked to impose structural adjustment reforms through loan conditionalities and to promote "good governance" among countries of the global South (Escobar 1995). And yet we must not lose sight of the fact that the terms of these relationships change alongside shifts in dominant paradigms of development. As institutional priorities respond to internal

and external critiques, new frameworks arise that classify the objects of development (cities, countries, regions, populations, etc.) according to different criteria (Goldman 2005; Ferguson 1994). Thus, to view the recent intense interest in the problem of risk only as a response to unpredictable social, political, and environmental conditions in Bogotá—even to understand it as a Colombian (or Latin American) phenomenon—would be to ignore the fact that Bogotá, as one of the places now included among the “Third World megacities,” is situated within a set of relationships that extends far beyond its boundaries (cf. Massey 1994). Adopting the terms Ferguson uses to characterize Africa’s standing within the wider categorical system he calls the “global order,” we must also view Bogotá as a “place-in-the-world” (2006, 5-6). For, as I have argued above, the megacity discourse classifies places like Bogotá within a group of cities with certain dysfunctional characteristics that are assumed to be shared among them: uncontrollable population growth, extreme concentration of poverty, deteriorating environmental conditions, and so on. Furthermore, since the global order imagined by this discourse discards the modernist narrative of progress—that is, Third World cities are no longer on the path to development, but rather to collapse, catastrophe, and chaos—transnational aid and expertise that may have once been invested in social services, welfare, infrastructure, education, and healthcare have been replaced by programs designed to promote precaution, preparedness, and prudence throughout a population of “responsibilized” citizens (Lakoff 2007; Rose 1999). Once framed by the megacity discourse, Bogotá becomes a city “at risk,” which, in turn, diagnoses the problem to be addressed by institutions like the World Bank.⁹

These are just some of the concrete consequences of policy changes that occur on multiple scales once a city is seen by multilateral development organizations as a problem of risk. There are others, as well, such as the promotion of popular education campaigns designed to train prudential individuals to prepare themselves and their families for any number of potential misfortunes, ranging from the loss of a job or a fire in the home to a terrorist attack or an earthquake. Such efforts inevitably draw from and promote the influence of new sources of knowledge and expertise, such as risk management and actuarial science. On the institutional level, we see similar shifts, such as increased investment in preparedness plans that seek to ensure that governmental agencies can and will respond efficiently and effectively to problems that arise and threaten to disturb the productive capacity or political stability of the city. The fortunes of national economies are now increasingly believed to be predicated on the ability of major cities to attract and maintain foreign investment in tourism, services, infrastructure, manufacturing, real estate, and information technology. Since a significant disturbance in the normal functioning of the city might result in widespread economic downturn or collapse, not to mention social and political unrest, national governments have come to view the entire urban assemblage as a security concern.

My critique of narrowly-conceived policies and programs that focus exclusively on risk—and, in doing so, shift attention and resources away from concerns such as poverty, rights, equality, education, housing, healthcare, or justice—is meant to have implications for the practice of urban planning. But, to be clear, my aim is neither to condemn this particular program nor denounce the dissemination and

circulation of abstract ideas, models, and plans for development and governance in cities of the global South (even those driven by Northern institutions like the World Bank).¹⁰ As urban planner and theorist Ananya Roy argues: “This is not simply an issue of the inappropriateness of Euro-American ideas for Third World cities. Planning practices are constantly borrowed and replicated across borders. To attempt to stem this tide is rather useless and indeed under some circumstances can mark a turn to isolationism” (2005, 147). Following Roy, my critique is aimed, not at the transnational circulation of abstract planning and development discourses and practices, but more precisely at the peculiar and provincial assumptions—such as those associated with by the megacity discourse—on which the travel of certain ideas, models, and plans are based.¹¹

Thinking Beyond the Megacity

In closing, another clarification and then a provocation. It may seem that I have argued that it is necessary to examine the discursive construction of the megacity, and in some ways this is what I have done. I do urge that we must consider how concepts like the megacity are never purely empirical categories or analytical tools, but are also discursive formations, loose in the world, producing effects, and possessing social, cultural, and political lives of their own (cf. Hall 1978). Their sphere of influence extends far beyond the articles, reports, and books written in North America and Europe. As such, the socially-constructed category of the megacity should be seen to enframe a field of thought and action, consolidate networks of actors, and render cities commensurate,

thus enabling abstract policies and programs to be implemented concretely in particular locations.

Surely, it is not a stretch to consider how conceptual maps dividing the world into megacities and global cities are simultaneously empirical tools and discursive formations. But I also caution against explaining their function in terms of the empirical and the discursive, the real and the imaginary, the concrete and the abstract, for to do so would endorse their claim to represent a world of which they are not a part (cf. Mitchell 1991, 2000, 2002). For alternatives, we might turn to Edward Soja’s (1996) notions of “Thirdspace” and the “real-and-imagined” or to Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of the “spatial triad” (which combines spaces of representation, representational space, and lived space): both attempt to rethink the same dualism in direct relation to space and to the urban question. Following Mitchell’s approach here, I insist that rather than criticizing the category of megacity for how poorly it corresponds to the lived realities of the places it claims to represent, we must ask: What does the megacity do, not as either an empirical description or a cultural representation of the real world, but as one of the many objects within it? Then we can see how the megacity asserts itself as a mere representation—either an analytical category that claims objectively to describe the world without itself being a part of it or a discursive category that claims merely to construct that world without playing a role in bringing it into being. And we realize, then, that the category of megacity also testifies to the reality of the world it claims to represent.

Mitchell argues that representations always make this double claim of denying their own reality and confirming the reality of the world they depict.¹² Thus



Figure 3: Dionisio González, “Aguas Espraiadas II,” 2004, c-print, diasec. Print courtesy of Fiedler Contemporary, Cologne.

he leads us to methodologies that scrutinize the social practices that frame time and space in particular ways. Extending Mitchell’s argument, it is perhaps only once we denaturalize the staging of the world according to this script that it becomes possible to imagine other forms of “city-ness” (Robinson 2006) beyond those that reinforce the historical logic and geographical order that have underpinned Euro-American imperialism and capitalist modernity. Such a task is especially necessary at the present moment, when influential imaginations of the global order, as I have argued, fix the cities of the global South in place within a de-developmentalized global hierarchy. The question, then, according to Mitchell, “is whether one can find a way to theorize the question of modernity”—or the city, for my purposes—“that relocates it within a global context and, at the same time, enables that context to complicate, rather than simply reverse, the narrative logic of modernization” (2000, 7). He argues that we can move beyond this predicament by taking into account the practices through which cities of the

global South are made to appear different—how the megacity discourse is a means by which this difference is produced (cf. Bhabha 2004). Yet, following Mitchell, we can also look to places that have been captured by the category of megacity and see what displacements are opened up by and within these spaces of difference.

There is an obvious need to search for new vocabularies and epistemologies (cf. Roy 2005)—to “practice ways of seeing and engaging urban spaces” (Simone 2004, 408)—that present alternatives to the ones supplied by the discourse on Third World megacities (the work of photographer Dionisio González, including the image that immediately precedes this essay as well as Figure 3 above, offers imaginative possibilities).¹³ As Robinson argues, categorizations of cities matter and must be interrogated because “they limit our potential to contribute to envisioning possible city futures” (2002, 546). Following her challenge to the categorical imperative of urban studies

in general, and sharpening its focus onto the megacity discourse, I believe much popular and scholarly thinking about cities of the global South “needs to decolonize its imagination about city-ness...if it is to sustain its relevance to the key urban challenges of the twenty-first century” (2002, 546). This essay has attempted to address that challenge by arguing that we ought to be wary of categories that appear to elude the historical logic and geographic order that have upheld Euro-American modernity and imperialism while they, in effect, reinscribe them—and reinscribe them, this time, without their salutary promise of change for the better. While concrete proposals are beyond the scope of this essay, I want to ask whether, by pushing beyond this juncture, we can begin to imagine the proliferation, dissemination, and circulation of other forms of theory and practice that may truly engender radical new forms of urbanism, not to mention social relations and political-economic configurations.

Austin Zeiderman is a PhD Candidate in Cultural and Social Anthropology at Stanford University whose work focuses an anthropological lens on the cultural and political dimensions of cities and urban space. In Bogotá, Colombia, he is conducting an ethnographic study of risk as an emergent technology of urban governance.

Lead Photograph

Dionisio González, “Buraco Quente II,” 2006, c-print, diasec. Print courtesy of Fiedler Contemporary, Cologne (<http://www.ulrichfiedler.com>).

Notes

¹ The notion of “big but not powerful” adequately sums up the twin characteristics most often associated with the relatively new category of the “megacity”: their massive demographic and spatial dimensions combined with their relative powerlessness (if not structural irrelevance) within the primary circuits of production and exchange of the global economy (Castells 1996; Sassen 1994). For example, when Mike Davis provides a table listing the “Third World Megacities,” the apparent criteria for inclusion among this group are simply demographic size and world-economic status (i.e., “Third World”) (2006, 4). (However, Davis ambiguously includes New York among the list of “Third World Megacities.” It remains unclear to the reader whether this is a comparative gesture, an editorial oversight, or an ironic joke.)

² In a related example, in late February 2007, when a significant drop in the Shanghai stock market caused a global stock slide, commentators expressed shock at the spatial and temporal dimensions of the event, which reversed the presumed causal relationship between the New York Stock Exchange and Chinese financial markets. “It’s not supposed to work this way,” remarked a stunned financial analyst interviewed by the BBC.

³ Here, Nuttall and Mbembe are responding to a critique by geographer Michael Watts (2005) of an earlier article of theirs on Johannesburg (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004).

⁴ The megacity is definitely not seen as a vision of the future by those for whom it is the present. As Ferguson argues, referring to the claim that we are in a “post-development era,” the “loss of credulity toward narratives of social and economic development has occurred not universally, but in specific ways and in specific *places*” (2006, 182-3). This fact was made starkly clear during a conversation with an ambitious, aspiring, and well-educated political figure in Bogotá. He argued that Third World cities have the right to follow the example set by the great cities of Europe and North America and, thus, to enact major urban renewal projects and often violent demolitions in the name of

modernization. His is not a view that sees Bogotá's current state as indicative of "cities of the future," and yet it also remains centrally located within the dominant narrative of urban progress and modernity. As does it reflect the same relationship between historical movement and geographical order that I discuss in relation to the megacity discourse.

⁵ As Nuttall and Mbembe point out with reference to Michael Watts' critique, "outsiders speak from places and within paradigms that carry their own baggage. One result may be a failure to see when one's own rules might not apply or when political, ideological, and hermeneutic certainty is not guaranteed" (2005, 193).

⁶ Mignolo's idea of the "locus of enunciation" is part of his larger critique of modernity/coloniality. Referring to philosopher Edmundo O'Gorman's thesis on the "universalism of Western culture," he argues: "'Occidentalism'... has two interrelated dimensions: First, it served to locate the geo-historical space of Western culture. But, less obviously, it also fixed the privileged locus of enunciation. It is from the West that the rest of the world is described, conceptualized, and ranked: that is, modernity is the self-description of Europe's role in history rather than an ontological historical process" (Mignolo 2005, 35).

⁷ This observation was made by Antonio Manrique, Professor of Architecture in Bogotá's University of the Andes, during our conversations in August 2006. Professor Manrique was involved in discussions and projects having to do with the UN initiative during this time.

⁸ To further demonstrate this point, one could look to a recent conference jointly organized by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) in May 2005. The conference was titled, "Foro Técnico sobre Reasentamiento de Población en América Latina y el Caribe" (or, "Technical Forum on Involuntary Resettlement in Latin America and the Caribbean"). It took place, coincidentally, in Bogotá. This conference followed a 2002 meeting in Salvador de Bahía, Brazil, and sought to further a regional dialogue on generally applicable methodologies, financial instruments, and legal mechanisms among academics, non-governmental organizations, consulting

firms, development experts, and representatives from local and national governments implementing similar programs in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and other cities. This conference did not focus officially on megacities, and in fact it included presentations about experiences with involuntary resettlement in small cities as well as rural areas across Latin America and the Caribbean. However, the category of megacity makes it possible for managers, experts, planners, and politicians from these diverse locations to imagine space in such a way that made their cities equivalent, and therefore able to be understood and operated on using the legal tools, financial instruments, and project methodologies that emerge from conferences such as this one.

⁹ An important question remains: Are the models of neoliberal governmentality that are currently spreading throughout cities and urban governments of the global South being (re)imported to the global North? Without conducting further research or relying heavily on those more familiar with the urban policy landscape of North America and Europe, I am unable to provide an answer. However, I am grateful to the editors of *Critical Planning* for pointing this out as a critical trajectory for future inquiry.

¹⁰ The persistence of Euro-American expertise in continuing to see itself as offering "advanced First World solutions" to "backward Third World problems" has been justly criticized, to such an extent that many other less paternalistic models of participatory development have emerged.

¹¹ In contrast to the viewpoint offered by the megacity discourse, Roy's interest is "in what it means to locate the production of theory and policy in the cities of the developing world" (2005, 147). I suspect that, were this to take place, the megacity would cease to be as popular of a concept (see also f. 4).

¹² Mitchell argues that the representation "always asserts that it is only a text, a mere picture, a copy, a play, a scheme, a framework, an abstraction, a projection, not something real. It defines itself by what it lacks, its missing originality, its immateriality, its want of immediate presence, by the gap

in time, space, and substance that separates it from the real thing. On the other hand, in asserting its own lack, a representation claims that the world it replicates, projects, reorganizes, enacts, or endows with meaning and structure must be, by contrast, original, material, immediately present, complete in itself, without lack, undelayed, filling its own time and space—in a word (what we imagine as) real” (2000, 18).

¹³ As Roy puts it: “There is an urgency for urban studies and planning to move beyond the dichotomy of First World ‘models’ and Third World ‘problems.’ One possible route is through policy approaches that seek to learn from Third World cities,” such as seeing urban informality as “an important epistemology for planning” (2005, 147, 156). However, alternative urban imaginaries emerge from a number of different sources outside of formal policy and planning circles, such as from the work of urban social movements or artists. The photographic creations of Dionisio González accomplish such a task by piecing together images of shantytowns and modern architecture to create representations of urban landscapes that challenge a number of the assumptions discussed in this essay (see <http://www.ulrichfiedler.com>).

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