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# Decentering Urban Theory

Hector Fernando Burga



In the last thirty years modernist planning techniques based on abstract knowledge and ideal representations have been challenged by more practical emphases on place, context, and precedent. However, placemaking as a development strategy has entered a new, unstable phase, as design professionals search for solutions to the global economic crisis.

Previously accepted urban design tools and programs are being reevaluated as their working assumptions become obsolete and questions surface about the sustainability of building technologies and the viability of longstanding sources of construction materials disappear. These changes have opened the door to a reimagining of social goals and expectations.

In this contemporary crisis the gap between theory and practice remains a source of tension in architecture, urban design, and planning. This discrepancy is normally evident between glorious visions on paper and the practical limits of building materials and between the speculative space of the classroom and the expediency of the project office. But now practitioners and the general public must also ponder the value of theory in a time of crisis.

The answer may very well be found in the metropolises of the global South. In cities such as São Paulo, Mumbai, and Kinshasa, new modes of professional practice are being constituted locally, provisionally, and with an in-depth reconsideration of material needs and social goals. Design interventions in these places,

**Above:** *Pixação* on a tower in São Paulo, Brazil. Since the 1980s *pixação* has become widespread on architectural facades, signalling the disenfranchisement of youth living on the city's periphery. Photo by Teresa Caldeira.



once considered the testing ground for top-down visions such as Brasília and Chandigarh, are refocusing the theory and practice of urbanism.

The conference “Peripheries:

**Top:** Graffiti on a gate in the periphery of São Paulo. The city’s periphery has become a site of autoconstruction, providing the basis for citizenship rights. Photo by Teresa Caldeira.

**Bottom:** A corner building in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, Mexico. Incremental construction can be used to develop an adaptive multiuse building. Photo by Jose Castillo.

Decentering Urban Theory” recently sought to explore this dislocation by presenting case studies of how the experience of cities of the South can be applied to urbanism in the North. Held at the University of California at Berkeley from February 5 to 7, it brought together urban theorists, practicing architects, development experts, and social activists from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. In presenting perspectives from cities like São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Mexico City,

Kinshasa, Johannesburg, Beirut, and Mumbai it also sought to provoke a South–South conversation that might one day lead to a decentered urban theory and professional practice.

### Practices in the Peripheries

In cultural terms, the word “peripheries” immediately brings to mind marginal locations, inconsequential to events and circumstances at the center. However, conference organizers chose to emphasize commonalities and differences across multiple sites, rather than a set of core principles. They also chose not to unify these views under a homogenous notion of periphery, but to encourage the formation of diverse expressions and possibilities.

The conference was divided into sessions titled “Peripheral Visions,” “New Urbanities and Mobilities,” “Neocenterings,” “States, Citizens and Metropolitan Fringes,” “Citizenship In-Formations,” and “Peripheral Recognitions.” Within these several panelists focused on alternative placemaking practices and their synergies with professional design and planning.

Professor Teresa Caldeira of the Department of City and Regional Planning at UC Berkeley outlined the practice of “auto-construction” in São Paulo, Brazil. She described this as “a mode of producing the urban [environment] in which residents build, by themselves, in a long process of continued improvements.” Frequently, it even includes the construction of sewage and electricity infrastructure and paved streets. To facilitate these practices Caldeira said urban planners have worked with residents to improve democratic decision-making.

Jose Castillo, from the Universidad Iberoamericana, referred to the peripheries of Mexico City as

“emerging urbanities.” He focused on Neza, an informal city on the outskirts of the megalopolis, which he said offers valuable lessons for designers and planners in relation to household size, program, building type, and adaptive reuse. He argued that Neza’s urban development is an “urbanism of the informal” which stands as a paradigm for diversity, plurality, innovation, and procedural inclusion.

Nasser Abourahme, from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in Jerusalem, continued the theme of new urbanities by describing the adaptive spatial practices of Palestinian refugees. In severely prescribed circumstances, they must improve the physical conditions of their camps, expand them beyond determined borders, and link their own infrastructural improvements to a political goal of self-representation. As a humanitarian worker, Abourahme said he recognized the value of alternative placemaking practices based on the political recognition of community identity.

In the “Neocenterings” panel, Neera Adarkar, an architect, researcher, and activist in Mumbai, explored the process of gentrification as a struggle between different populations. In her work, she said, she must assume multiple roles. But she has found that architecture can be a complement to activism. Her particular efforts have included focusing on labor politics to mobilize negotiations between different groups making claims to space in the city.

Finally, the UC Berkeley anthropology professor James Holston called for the establishment of urban citizenship as a basis for legal rights. For Holston, access to space in the city is contingent upon such a reevaluation. This can occur when residents claim urban space by constructing it themselves

and then legalize their claim. Holston analyzed the qualities of urban citizenship, and argued for an alternative mode of placemaking involving the formation of a political community which identifies itself with the city.

### **Making Place for the Periphery**

The peripheries conference, co-organized by professors Caldeira and Holston, was sponsored by a network of research institutions at UC Berkeley, including the Global Metropolitan Studies institute, the Center for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona, the Center for Latin American Studies, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, the Department of Anthropology, the Department of City and Regional Planning, and the Townsend Center for the Humanities.<sup>1</sup>

Its sessions provided evidence that professional practices may be reconstituted locally to help residents make territorial claims, acquire resources, and gain political representation. While cities in the global South endure acute problems of resource depletion, governance, overpopulation, sustainability, and social equity,

they also demonstrate a wide range of innovative interventions by designers, social-justice activists, and development planners. These may occur in a range of areas: encampments, war reconstruction, and border zones.

While these spaces exist on the margins of urban theory and design practice, they reveal another dimension of placemaking, one which is not necessarily driven by professional codes, design standards, or aesthetics. Rather, it is driven by creativity and adaptation to resolve everyday problems of sheer necessity. In a time of crisis, these practices may help outline new paths of action in both North and South.

### **Note**

1. Other speakers included Richard Walker, Ananya Roy, Nezar AlSayyad, and You-Tien Zhang of UC Berkeley; AbdouMaliq Simone from Goldsmith College; Mona Harb from University of Beirut; Oren Yiftachel from Ben Gurion University; Adrian Gorelik from Universidad de Quilmes Argentina; Judit Carrera and Josep Ramoneda from the Center for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona; Martina Rieker from the American University in Cairo; James Ferguson from Stanford University; Li Zhang of UC Davis; and Edgar Pieterse of the University of Cape Town.

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