Big Cities – Small Changes. Thinking Creatively Through Urban Infrastructure

Veranstalter: British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences
Datum, Ort: 20.02.2018, London
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On Tuesday, 20th February 2018, the British Academy invited to the conference „Big Cities – Small Changes. Thinking Creatively Through Urban Infrastructure" as the official launch event of its „Cities and Infrastructure" research programme. This programme brings together 17 UK universities with multiple partners from cities around the world.[1] On the day of the conference, scholars, activists and other members of civil society from London to Accra to São Paulo followed its call.

CAROLINE KNOWLES (Goldsmiths), programme director and convenor of the day, introduced the aim of the conference: advancing knowledge capable to produce *small* changes in response to *big* global urban challenges. Small changes, she elaborated, act faster and are closer to the „rhythms of endurance" of urban life (a term borrowed from AbdouMaliq Simone). Tuning in to them, however, involves expanding the notion of infrastructure and this, she explained the conference's subtitle, requires *creative* thinking and to engage with infrastructure in terms of its „instability and fragility". ASH AMIN (University of Cambridge, British Academy) evoked the need to rethink the current state of urban affairs, which he characterised as „stretch and stress". Thinking these affairs *through* infrastructure, he suggested, is a way forward that could bridge the gap between planning and everyday practice. Proper to the subject matter, outside drilling repeatedly reminded the participants of the physical building involved in infrastructure.

The first panel aimed at thinking creatively through urban infrastructure from within the nexus of violence and vulnerabilities. It set out with reports from urban planning processes in China. The anthropologist STEPHAN FEUCHTWANG (London School of Economics, LSE) framed these processes as „planning assaults" given that the destruction and relocation they imply do effectively worsen life through planning. Surprisingly, he then elaborated how it is not only the people who are vulnerable to state planning, but also the state to private profiteers. Indeed, the Chinese state – often incorrectly reduced to merely being authoritarian, as he claimed – can be quite responsive and experimental in its execution of local planning efforts. To this regard, urban planner PAULA MORAIS (Bartlett, University College London, UCL) added her account of how talkback radio shows provide residents and planners with a safe auditory space for (limited) citizen participation.

The sociologist GABRIEL DE SANTIS FELTRAN (Federal University São Carlos) picked up on the relation between state infrastructure provision and affected populations by presenting the case of drug-related crime in São Paulo. While crime is actually a huge and, essentially, transnational market the state's dealing with it is limited to solely increasing violence on the local level. Apart from militarising the streets this implies rolling out punitive infrastructures. The exponential rise of prisons in São Paolo thus demonstrates that it is not an increase in power but in vision that is needed in order for the state to improve its actions. Feltran concluded that thinking creatively through this case helps perceiving violence not as a safety problem but as an issue of well-fare and social sustainability.

DAVID DODMAN (International Institute for Environment and Development, IIED), expert on climate change vulnerability, carried on by sketching out the benefit that arises when thinking cities, infrastructures and their fragility through the perspective of risk. He defined risk as the „likeliness of harm" and pointed to the necessity to take into view (i) the „drivers of risk" (health, mobility, shelter, access to possibilities), (ii) to make out the „spectrum of risk" (from intensive to extensive, everyday risks) and recognise the latter as bearing significant effect on peoples' lives,

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[1] British Academy, press release from: 11.09.2017, https://www.britac.ac.uk/news/british-academy-announces-cities-infrastructure-programme-awards (23.03.2018).

(iii) and to look at the „changing nature of risk" in light of changing urban conditions. Risks, he concluded, change more dramatically in small cities because of their substantial lack of infrastructure. Climate change, finally, acts both as a „multiplyer" and „likelifyer" of risk.

Chairing the discussion, SUSANNE HALL (LSE) called out to incorporate into our thinking all scales, actors and interests, as well as vulnerabilities and risks involved in the provision, maintenance, use and – I would further differentiate – diversion of infrastructures. Two indispensable comments from the floor rounded up the debate: For one it was raised that „we need to ask: who is benefiting from the production of risk?" Secondly, the subtle yet brutal violence built around gender and race requires close consideration as it inevitably undercuts all infrastructures and their power relations. In other words, while it is important to speak about the state when speaking about infrastructures and cities, it is equally important to listen to the diversity of voices that constitute and practice their publics. Left unattended throughout the day, this points to the role of non-human participants in the socio-technical networks that cities are.[2]

Panel two delved into ways of living in displacement while fostering dialogue also between the social sciences and members of civil society. In the programme flyer, the discussion was introduced by asking about the challenges that large populations „liv[ing] on the move" pose to the provision of "(fixed) urban infrastructure". On this ground, PENNY GREEN (Queen Mary), professor for Law and Globalisation, invited the panellists to reflect on the drivers for „human flow". By this she also laid out the baseline for critical engagement with the way that (forced or voluntary) human migration is commonly framed: speaking of 'flow' with regard to human movement, the panel showed, is likely to be misleading. Elsewhere, Knowles had remarked already that „[P]eople and objects do not flow. They bump awkwardly along creating pathways as they go. They grate against each other, dodge, stop and go, negotiate obstacles, back-track and move off in new directions".[3]

In this sense, SAM CODJOE (Regional Institute for Population Studies, University of Ghana) provided a vivid picture of the need for case-sensitive analysis in order to address any refugee question. Drawing on a case concerned with introducing a waste collection system, Codjoe furthermore highlighted the importance of focusing on small and medium-sized cities as well as on those located in river deltas and on coastlines, as these are the first to be affected by rising sea levels and thus to emit new populations of migrants in the near future.

The independent Ethiopian journalist SAMUEL GETACHEW (Addis Abeba) turned the attention to the methodological challenges implied in studying – or even asking about – human mobility in countries like his own. Censorship can have people go to prison or be muted in even more harmful ways. At the same time, undemocratic governments are not the only ones to blame, e.g., when it comes to hands-on land-grabbing by international corporations or to the 'soft abuse' of „poor black children" in order to „paint the image of the world-saving West/Westerner". What is needed, Getachew concluded, is to „support African women! [Because] they raise the children and have the possibility to change the narrative by which these children grow up!"

ROBERT HAKIZA (Young African Refugees for Integrated Development, Uganda) reported from a camp in Kampala with more than 100.000 permanent-temporary inhabitants. Himself being a refugee, Hakiza highlighted the discrepancy between rights granted on paper and effective rights. He also raised awareness about the need to differentiate between public perception and everyday reality where people might as well get on through creative making-do.

The absence of MOHAMED FOUAD (American University Beirut) partly explains why the session experienced an imbalance towards stories of migration from Africa. There was a sense of the divide between Western theory production and issues of de-

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[2] Ash Amin / Nigel Thrift, Seeing Like a City, Cambridge 2016.
[3] Caroline Knowles, Cities on the move: Navigating urban life, in: City 15,2 (2011), pp. 135-153, here: p. 138.

velopment reported from the global South.[4] The audience challenged the flow of money and learning of the entire British Academy programme that effectively will position UK universities as international gatekeepers. To this critique Getachew responded that knowledge partnerships like the BBC news outlets in Ethiopia do have the power to change things as they help getting different voices out on the street.

Panel three picked up on these themes by turning to the path from knowledge to change. In the first two presentations, anthropologist AMMARA MAQSOOD (University of Manchester) and urban scholar SOBIA AHMAD KAKER (Goldsmiths) reported from fieldwork in Lahore and Karachi; the former focusing on the formation of protest in response to the introduction of a Rapid Transport System and the second on the everyday learning implied in navigating the city's registers of uncertainty. Both presenters asked how knowledge is made, mobilised, practiced and circulated not between 'the street' and academia, but among residents themselves. However, what Kaker coined „incremental ways of dealing with problems" was challenged with regard to the dangers (e.g. of rumours) involved. Here, Michael Keith suggested thinking the problem in terms of a „knowledge infrastructure that makes the city legible and mediates the elsewhere" while certainly bearing in mind how infrastructures are never neutral nor flawless.

The debate then turned to what kind of knowledge we need to produce – and to what counts as knowledge in the first place. ALICE SVERDLIK (IIED) reported from her research with slum dwellers in Nairobi, zooming in on food vendors, gang control over municipal water supply and women's experiences of living in slum conditions. KAI WEISE (International Council of Monuments and Sites, Nepal), in turn, brought forward a sharp critique of the international earthquake response system as it acts by measures both too swift and too fixed as to respond with sensibility to local ways of doing and, importantly, knowing.

In the following, ADRIANA ALLEN (Development Planning Unit, UCL) called out for self-critique and theoretical reflection: she identified five deficits with regard to the study of infrastructure that urban studies, and urban scholars, need to defy. These are: (i) the „commitment deficit": urban scholars have become less and less aspirational with what they want to achieve with their research, gradually reducing their commitment with the world and those in need. (ii) The „measurement deficit": much of the profession is too deeply engaged in efforts of counting while knowingly ignoring that numbers on their own do not account for improvement. (iii) The „conceptual deficit" that divides much of the research being done in disconnected branches while what is needed is to simultaneously engage with issues of resources, participation, use, capacity, access… (iv) The „time and space deficit": much research is done without a map, i.e. without territorial, physical-spatial as well as temporal-spatial awareness. This is to ask: „where is a situation actually located in time and space? How do people move in and out of it? – Only than can we target solutions." (v) And the „capacity deficit": current endeavours fostering development primarily look at what people can do rather than at what it is that ties people's hands. What is imperative is to look between these two poles so to identify and foster what people need to be empowered, to move from 'can do' to actually 'doing change'. In Allen's words: „What *transformative* knowledge do we produce? – Because we need it for politics."

Panel four followed this call asking about the possibilities for small changes. KALPANA VISHWANTH, co-founder of the New Delhi social enterprise SafetiPin[5], reported from her work with developing a technology application that makes cities safer, in particular, for women. Her approach is building an interactive map that registers the perception of safety in specific places. „Women are commonly told to stay home at night," Vishwanth expressed her anger with gendered spatial injustice, „but: no! Women want the right to take risks as anyone else."

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[4] Jennifer Robinson, Global and World Cities: A View from off the Map, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 26,3 (2002), pp. 531-54.

[5] See Safetipin: http://www.safetipin.com/ (08.04.2018).

MICHAEL KEITH (University of Oxford) then explored the implications of the city being a „site of emergence" and composed of „paths that are always novel" because of their ever-new combination. How can we „think through this emergence", he asked. Providing an answer he stated that all interventions, social or material, are always forms of experiment and, as such, do not produce solutions but „alternative futures". These need to be made visible – and it is by thinking through different scales and by listening to all registers of knowing, including the arts, that this can be achieved.

Experiences from planning in Barcelona and everyday life in Rio de Janeiro rounded off the panel. SARA ORTIZ ESCALANTE (Col-lectiu Punt 6) referred to her efforts to voice 'the other' in municipal planning processes from an intersectional, feminist perspective. SAM LIEBMANN with LEE MCKARKIEL (independent) screened a clip from their 2010 documentary „More Earth Will Fall", a film that follows a family into their life full of fear, habituation and joy amidst armed confrontations in a favela. Vividly, these examples testified how the arts have „convening power" (Keith) by which they bring people and visions of change together.

The conference was closed by Knowles spelling out some of the aspects raised during the day. Having worked our way through infrastructure as a lens, set of commitments and device for mediating elsewhere's she concluded that part of making the multiple workings of infrastructure visible, and activating them for producing change, is precisely by engaging creatively in their material formations and social practicing. This means „working with the tensions" of how human infrastructures encounter physical and technological infrastructures. As a reward, thinking creatively through infrastructure can open a „space to think more freely" and to „think connectively", including to „better talk to each other across disciplines". This, I agree, contributes to both improving everyday life in cities and to finding new ways into their socio-material/technical conundrums.

Conference Overview:

Welcome & Opening Remarks:
Ash Amin (Cambridge) and Caroline Knowles (London)

Panel 1: Violence & Vulnerabilities:
Chair: Susanne Hall (London)

Speakers: Stephan Feuchtwang (London), Paula Morais (London), David Dodman (London) and Gabriel de Santis Feltran (São Paulo)

Panel 2: Living in Displacement:
Chair: Penny Green (London)

Speakers: Sam Codjoe (Accra), Mohamed Fouad (Beirut, absent), Samuel Getachew (Addis Ababa) and Robert Hakiza (Kampala)

Panel 3: Knowledge & Change:
Chair: Sir Alan Wilson (London)

Speakers: Ammara Maqsood (Manchester), Sobia Ahmad Kaker (London), Adriana Allen (London), Alice Sverdlik (London) and Kai Weise (Durham)

Panel 4: Possibilities & Small Changes:
Chair: Ash Amin (Cambridge)

Speakers: Kalpana Vishwanth (New Delhi), Michael Keith (Oxford), Jorge Peña Díaz (Havana), Sara Ortiz Escalante (Barcelona) and Sam Liebmann and Lee McKarkiel (London, Rio de Janeiro).

Tagungsbericht *Big Cities – Small Changes. Thinking Creatively Through Urban Infrastructure*. 20.02.2018, London, in: H-Soz-Kult 17.04.2018.