

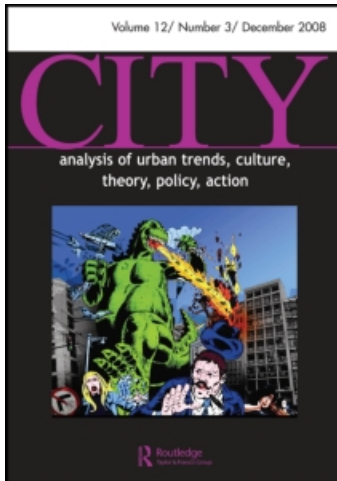
This article was downloaded by: [Chatterton, Paul][University of Leeds]

On: 11 June 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 917203294]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



City

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713410570>

The urban impossible: A eulogy for the unfinished city

Paul Chatterton

Online publication date: 11 June 2010

To cite this Article Chatterton, Paul(2010) 'The urban impossible: A eulogy for the unfinished city', City, 14: 3, 234 – 244

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2010.482272

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2010.482272>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The urban impossible

A eulogy for the unfinished city

Paul Chatterton

This paper extends the debate on the right to the city through the idea of the urban impossible. The starting premise is the fundamental and age-old question—what actually is a city, what do we want it to be and who should be involved in its making? The right to the city is not just a movement for material rights, but also the right to shape, intervene and participate in the unfolding idea of the city. Cities, then, are living organic, conflictual entities that are constantly remade and recast in thousands of ways through everyday encounters. In different moments, new possibilities for radically different cities open up. The city, then, is an unfinished, expansive and unbounded story. The urban impossible demands a much wider political imaginary to intervene in the unfolding story of the city and calls for a radical appetite for change to inform the work of urban researchers. The agenda becomes not so much about what the city currently is or what it was, but more about what it could become, what it has never been. I outline some directions that this kind of research agenda needs to take; in particular, the need to develop a broad critique of the urban growth machine and developing processes and mechanisms for more participatory and direct forms of urban democracy. This is the urban impossible: being simultaneously within, against and beyond the current urban condition. Like an Alice in Wonderland who has found herself in the city, we need to dream six impossible cities before breakfast.

Key words: urban, politics, democracy, participation, right, city

Introduction

A rich debate has emerged on the 'Right to the City' in the pages of this journal and beyond over the last year. This marks a return to a debate with a long, important and conflictual pedigree (see Lefebvre, 1972; Mitchell, 2003; Brenner *et al.*, 2009; Harvey, 2008), and one which is still crucial and raises really fundamental questions that every generation

should return to—what actually is a city, what do we want it to be and who should be involved in its making? These are questions that this journal has long foregrounded. The title of this journal almost deserves an exclamation mark, exclaiming City! as an idea to be fought over as much as a fixed form; and demanding an exploration into what the city could become, as much as what it is today.* What I want to do in this paper is to offer some further

*The 'original idea in founding CITY was that it should be entitled CITY! with the exclamation mark indicating an imperative (let the city be a real city!) hinting that the true qualities of cities have to be affirmed and reclaimed.' See *Surborg, Björn 'Reclaim the City!'—a review of the special session at the 2007 Association of American Geographers' annual meeting*. *City*, 11:3, 422–427. partic. pp. 422–423 - *Ed.*

thoughts on the ‘right to the city’ debate through the idea of the urban impossible. Fighting for what is possible, known or easily achieved will only ever give us limited purchase on social change. Social justice and equality, and the dreams we have of a better world, lie in exploring and making real what currently seems impossible, unknown or out of our reach. The urban impossible is more like an art than an academic practice. It is emergent, difficult and held up to public scrutiny. Seen in this light, the right to the city is not just a movement for material rights, although of course these are crucial, but the right to shape, intervene and participate in the unfolding idea of the city. As Marcuse (2009, p. 193) pointed out ‘it is not the right to the existing city that is demanded, but the right to a future city’. The key role for the urban imaginer is to make today’s impossibility into tomorrow’s possibility.

This paper is also partly informed by the recent debate between Chris Hamnett and Tom Slater in this journal on gentrification and displacement (see Slater, 2009, 2010; Hamnett, 2009, 2010). I am not interested in taking sides or interrogating the validity of the detail of this debate. (However, I must state from the outset that I largely agree with Tom Slater and share his strong desire to intervene against, challenge and reverse the powerful class forces that continue to displace and marginalise poorer social groups in our cities.) But what it made me reflect on while reading the debate was that a deep desire to create new vocabularies, imaginations and strategies for action that could bring about a radically different city are largely absent in writings on the city. While debates about the ills, or not, of gentrification can help us to organise and sharpen our analysis on current directions and class alliances in the contemporary city, my view is that we need to develop a much wider political imaginary to intervene in the unfolding story of the city and engage in the building of an equalising participatory democracy to realise radically different

urban futures and values. My motivation for writing this is that many urban scholars and researchers, as well as the journals they write in, have become hampered by a poverty of imagination, and a reluctance to use their work to dream the urban impossible and harvest that future in the present (Clever, 1993). There is a radical levelling desire in the urban impossible, one long echoed in English history and immortalised in the words of Thomas Rainsborough, colonel of the New Model Army during the English Civil War:

‘... for really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he; and therefore truly. Sir, I think it’s clear that every man that is to live under a Government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that Government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that Government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under.’

What I call for is a radical appetite for change to inform our work. Like an Alice in Wonderland who has found herself in the city, we need to dream six impossible cities before breakfast.

The unfinished story of the right to the city

Cities are unfinished stories, and anyone who claims a right to the city has to move with this dynamic. If we inject a sense of movement and possibility into our analyses we begin to explore what ideas, social forces, class alliances and interventions actively make and remake the city. When we do this we begin to see the city not just as a static noun, but as an active verb. Cities are places; we arrive in a city centre, or at its metropolitan limits. But we cannot understand how cities are created if we see them simply as bounded entities with defined limits. Doreen Massey (2004) has made us alive to the relational construction of place, where cities are made and remade through relations and circuits of power that

stretch within, but also beyond, its boundaries. Cities, then, are living organic, conflictual entities that are constantly remade and recast in thousands of ways through everyday encounters, many of which are local, and many which are extra-local. In different moments, new possibilities for radically different cities open up. The city, then, is an unfinished, expansive and unbounded story.

The more fundamental question that follows from this is who has ownership, or authorship, over the evolving idea of the city, who is currently and who should be, involved in its making? Individuals, groups and coalitions often with very different values strive to intervene, improve and determine their futures. Of course, while many people are involved in shaping the city, some are more successful (and powerful) than others. While some visions succeed, others wither or are shelved, while some are viciously oppressed. The task of the critical urbanist is to be an advocate for different and more just urban worlds, to set up processes that can create alternatives, make them seem feasible, doable and respectable, and make what we have now seem absurd or just downright unjust. Each building, public space, policy document, speech or strike, is an opportunity to intervene, educate, build alliances, propose alternatives and signpost new directions.

We need to rightly state the problem. Rather than simply trying to improve the present state of things, we need to think, research and act towards the idea of the city differently if we are to find solutions that will build more progressive futures. What we have now in terms of the thing we call the city is but one outcome amongst many in terms of how social forces can come together to create social-spatial relations. Much writing often fixates on the decline of cities from a golden age, becoming obsessed with a pathology of sick cities. From this state of sickness, we become obsessed with either returning to a former ideal in a golden age of the city, or largely throwing our lot in with the status quo and fixing current problems. Murray

Bookchin's *Urbanization without Cities* (1996) highlighted the need to constantly fight for the idea of a convivial city rather than a sprawling process of urbanisation that is more connected to the needs of capital rather than human well-being. Similar ideas were echoed by Colin Ward in his book *Welcome Thinner City* (1989) which called for a less dense but more human city. What form this city may take is unclear as it has never fully existed, and it would in all likelihood depart radically from what we currently know as the city. There have been many inspiring examples from previous eras and places, and it is these past examples that often inspire us to build a different kind of future. The Zapatistas of Mexico call their process of revolutionary change 'a tomorrow that is harvested in the past'. Prefiguration is key here, where the means actively shape ends; and in fact, means become the ends (Franks, 2003). So my interest lies less in what the city currently is or what it was, but more in what it could become, in what it has never been. Such an approach is strongly utopian, but this is not a project that searches for a perfect ideal, but a militant utopianism that demands that the future be made in the present. This is the urban impossible—simultaneously within, against and beyond the current urban condition.

Recent debates on gentrification are illustrative of such problems. Gentrification is seen as the redemption of cities that saved them from decline and dereliction. What are not considered are the untold other paths which could have been explored. Anyone who criticises property-led urban renewal is accused of re-consigning cities into a spiral of decline. This gets to the heart of the poverty which we often encounter in terms of imagining alternative urban futures and organising to put these into practice. But what if we want neither dereliction nor gentrification, but the right to determine our own cities, to intervene in their governance, their spaces, factories, lofts and old industrial spaces. In the Alternatives section of this issue of *City*, we have published a manifesto by a German group called the *Initiative Not in Our Name*,

Marke Hamburg, who re-iterate such points as their city becomes a brand aimed at a wealthy and mobile elite. Amongst this infrastructure lay the seeds of countless possible urban futures. Each needs different political wills, commitments, resources, forms of organising and institutions. Each is as possible as the next. The unfinished city, then, constantly has properties that are emergent, in a process of becoming and it is in these spaces of emergence that innovation and new models for change flourish (Grosz, 1999).

Given what we seem to be up against, dreaming a world beyond neoliberalism, ceaseless growth and wage labour seems to be an impossible task, relegated to academics, political hacks, the insane or the naive. But the urban impossible is a desire for new political imaginaries (Bonfeld, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2009). Drawing on the work of Badiou and Žižek, Swyngedouw (2009) suggests that the political act is actually not the art of the possible, but that of the impossible, and creates interventions and spaces that cannot be understood in terms of established symbolic framings. What we need, then, is to create an appetite for thinking and acting beyond currently acknowledged frames of reference. Reflexive and transformatory change organisers and organisations play a role here; they build the capacity to experiment and dream, create momentum and point to seemingly impossible new directions for cities. This also means being brave enough to let go. As Grosz (1999, p. 11) comments: 'What, for example, would politics be like if it were not directed to the attainment of certain goals, the coming to fruition of ideals or plans, but rather required a certain abandonment of goals?' So while the urban impossible is grounded in strategic thinking, it is a strategy that embraces movement, openness and experimentation.

A note on solidarity, strategy and academic research

I want to provide a short detour reflecting on the implications of the recent Slater–Hamnett

debate that has ensued in the pages of this journal and what it means for critical urban research. We have seen differences of opinion emerge between academics who may have previously assumed they were aiming for similar targets of a socially just city. These kinds of tense moments are instructive for a number of reasons. First, they highlight the differences between academic writing and broader political strategy. The two are often confused, and to the detriment of groups on both sides of the debate—academics and campaign/community groups. What is needed is more clarity on the strategic intent of research being undertaken by academics. On the one hand, academics can undertake research and produce findings which then become useful to those on frontlines, breadlines or fencelines of struggles against oppression. We need these kinds of academics who are analysing data-sets, exposing inconsistencies in policy, writing peer reviewed papers offering detailed and detached commentary. These academics might be driven by a desire to change the world in progressive ways, but are not necessarily intimately connected with groups fighting oppression. But these academics still have a useful role to play, as they provide useful academic ammunition.

On the other hand, working and collaborating in solidarity with groups in active struggle to develop broader strategy and directly useful material of a tactical and directly relevant nature is a very different arena and requires a sympathetic use of certain methodologies (see Kindon *et al.*, 2007; Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). Differences like these were perhaps at the heart of the Hamnett–Slater debate in this journal. One academic is more intimately connected with those being displaced and hence keen to produce material of a more interventionist and strategic nature, and one less currently connected with such groups who is doing more long range, detached work. Academics of both kinds would claim that they are working towards social transformation. In general, both are right and both are valued and needed for different

reasons. Solidarity with those in resistance can take many forms, and the links may not be that direct. Good research from the mainstream can also play a part in developing solidarity. The capacity of senior professors needs to be fed into debates without necessarily making them feel that they have to join the revolution!

Sticking points come when senior academics are seen to change sides from their younger, more radical days, and defend the status quo in public. But given the fluid and open nature of the academy, we just cannot expect too much of each other. The majority of urban researchers have not collectively signed up to any kind of strategy, nor do they work as a strategic collective (one exception is the International Network for Urban Research and Action). A school of thought or subdiscipline is not the same as a strategic alliance, campaign or lobby group, nor should we expect academic debates to undertake joined-up strategic thinking. We need to be honest about this, and have an open discussion about what strategic research actually would mean if we undertook it, what kinds of collaborative and participatory methodologies it presupposes, and the kinds of commitments to the co-production of research agendas it necessitates.

A further thorny point occurs when academic research gets into the public domain. Issues of gentrification and urban change are an excellent example. They lend themselves as excellent topics for public debate, they easily polarise views across a political spectrum, they presuppose different scenarios and policy responses and examples can be marshalled on both sides of the 'good', 'bad' divide. Anger often surfaces against academics that double up as liberal *commentariats* in the mainstream press when they put out messages which support the neoliberal status quo, or undermine arguments for social justice or redistribution of resources. This strikes me as having unrealistic expectations of the liberal press (as well as of academics as political actors). Their role is to generate debate, and the more controversial the better.

There is no commitment to strategic thinking, nor should we expect this from them. Most academics will always work in highly individual ways, feathering their own nests, egos and careers. The incentive structures in our workplaces promote this. Critical urbanists can respond to this by creating and deepening networks of solidarity between researchers, building a knowledge commons by creating open source platforms for research findings, and making strategic links with marginalised groups with whom they can collaboratively develop research agendas and undertake action-research. They can also undertake research which is not just about proposing how we change the world, but helping understand how we can organise social transformation (Conti, 2005). That is why Marcuse's formulation 'expose, propose, politicise' is so important. Very rarely do we see a commitment to all three amongst urban researchers.

Facing up to the urban growth machine

Debates on gentrification and the right to the city often overlook, or underestimate, urgent future challenges; and in particular those concerning the unsustainability of high levels of economic growth, and the social and ecological justice issues which go along with this. The whole process of urban growth and change over the last 30 years is largely a story of the emergence of prosperous central areas to stimulate economic growth, capital accumulation and opportunities for retail expenditure. The property boom in downtown areas, largely driven by speculative capital and corporate players, has become a visible sign of that growth logic. Multinationals and pension funds have needed somewhere to sink, stabilise and securitise their capital, and city property markets have provided an ideal platform (Harvey, 2005). In the context of the UK, the idea of the city-region based around core cities, has become a central part of this push for a high growth, internationalised economy. Central areas in large cities have shifted largely from dereliction to

renewal through a new set of business-friendly class alliances, institutions and investment strategies.

Downtown areas in large metropolitan areas, then, largely service a mobile business class, in-migrant students and visitors and have become saturated with consumer opportunities. Chris Hamnett in his piece in this journal (2010) rightly points out to the growth of middle-class groups in central areas, many of whom have taken advantage of the growth of new residential high rise blocks and the renovation of old industrial buildings. This expansion has followed the shift of the economic base of cities to financial and business services and consumer-leisure activities. Post compulsory students have become a key part of this urban renaissance story, a point overlooked by many urban researchers (for an exception see Smith, 2005). Large swathes of cities have become focused on meeting the needs of large groups of young university students who have high propensities to credit-fuelled consumer spending. The huge growth in university populations has merged with large groups of post-student and young professionals, all of whom have contributed to the youth and consumer-oriented city.

But this whole story of the social and economic recomposition of central urban areas was never just about narrow issues of housing or gentrification. It also concerns the ownership and use of land, and the meaning and function of work and community. Moreover, this is not just about the physical gentrification of buildings, but also the accompanying slow and insidious gentrification of our minds, outlooks, habits, workplaces, leisure patterns and home life. What gentrification researchers have perhaps been reluctant to outline in detail are the deep and fundamental processes of class decomposition and recomposition across circuits of social production, consumption, distribution and reproduction that have remade our cities in complex ways. Visually we see this through the proliferation of private gyms, wine bars, boutiques, loft living, high-grade

offices, privatised streets, but also through the new micro surveillance tactics on downtown streets, codifying and often excluding those who do not fit the social mould. The now well-established benchmarks of what city life is all about are leisurely coffees in corporate chains, business lunches, shopping opportunities, and a feeling of intense individual satisfaction and achievement at making the right consumer decision amongst all that choice. Anything else just seems odd, even subversive! This has happened slowly over the last 30 years, so slowly perhaps that it has partly seduced those who might otherwise have critiqued it. This seduction has dampened our analytical edge and our ability to propose alternatives.

There are many glaring omissions in current debates, and two are worthy of mention here. First, what is too infrequently discussed in this social and economic recomposition of the consumption-oriented central city are issues of rapid climate change impacts, energy scarcity and fossil fuel dependency, and addiction to ceaseless economy growth, or what Oliver James (2007) calls 'affluenza'. High levels of consumerism give cities mushrooming ecological impacts, implicating urban residents in a global ecological footprint which is out of control in respect to the size of the city and its resource base. A report called *City Limits* (Best Foot Forward, 2002), for example, found that an average Londoner consumed 6.63 global hectares (Gha), compared to the global average of 2.18. Given what we know about the direct links between production, credit-fuelled consumerism and carbon emissions, the consumer function of cities has to be seriously curtailed and relocalised if we are to tackle climate change. Moreover, the prospect of future energy constraints and the peaking of oil supplies means that cities will anyhow have to radically reduce their dependency on fossil fuel inputs, fundamentally reorganising the provision of housing, energy, food and transport (Lerch, 2009). In the pages of this journal, Adrian Atkinson has gone to great lengths to point out the

fundamental unsustainability of cities in their present highly fossil fuel addicted form (2007). The worrying fact is that nothing short of a global moratorium on the use of known fossil fuel reserves is likely to avert us from exceeding the tipping point of dangerous climate change (Monbiot, 2009). Any serious argument about either the validity or not of gentrification or the right to the city has to tackle head on the elephants in the room—the model of ceaseless economic growth, and the ecological impacts that go along with this—which contemporary urban life is predicted upon. It also has to tackle the individualist and consumerist values that underpin it, creating in their place a strong impulse for social and ecological justice. Urban de-growth strategies need to be firmly on the agenda along with social justice issues as part of the right to the city, which ask how can prosperity be maintained without high levels of growth and resource throughputs? (Jackson, 2009). The idea of a steady state economy plays a key role here stressing an economy that seeks to provide basic needs without expanding through interdependence and cooperation (Daly, 1980). The new restraints of climate change and energy scarcity reinforces questions like: What activities should be undertaken in cities? Who gets to decide what these are?

The second neglected issue relates to the growing precarity that affects people right across the social spectrum as a result of neoliberal restructuring of the economy (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). Portraits of whole neighbourhoods filled with new middle-class gentrifiers, as accurate as they are, misses wider issues of alienation, disempowerment and precarity that people, both working and middle class, feel. Moreover, the expansion of the urban middle classes should not be equated with a simple expansion of well-being and prosperity. What the middle class classification of central areas also partly illuminates is the increasing disfunctionality of many service sector jobs in the city. Census data and occupation analysis cannot pick this up. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) have metic-

ulously highlighted that increased income above a certain level does not result in extra social well-being or happiness. This is sobering analysis for policy-makers who want to stuff cities full of more affluent people. Behind the superficial upgrading of the urban fabric lie much deeper problems of social alienation, debt, disfunctionality, low self-esteem and absence of a sense of community. Housing tenure may change, precarity might not. And in the process we miss opportunities for novel cross-class alliances that might emerge to reregulate and control our market economies.

Being realistic, demanding the impossible

Making the urban impossible into a reality is a call to action that has resulted in many fruitful examples. In this next section I want to explore some of the alternatives that could make up more progressive urban futures, and how they might be promoted. What is at stake here is not simply ways which we can stop the rash of middle-class residential high rises, or how to defend the homes of the most marginalised, although these are of course key elements to any progressive right to the city strategy. At its heart are issues of the control of land and institutions, justice, participation and democracy, and restraining further market penetration and de-commodifying both land and housing.

Colin Ward (1985, 1996) has highlighted the many rich experiments in citizen control through self-help and mutual aid especially in terms of housing provision. Examples here include informal settlements such as the cotters of the 18th century, the interwar plotlands, the post-war squatting movement and more temporary traveller communities. More recently, Community Land Trusts have been growing in many countries as a way for communities to own land and buildings collectively and assets in perpetuity for the benefit of the community. The Land Trust movement in Scotland has been particularly strong and has allowed communities to buy

back land which has historically been owned by powerful absentee landlords. Since 2008, the CLT movement in the UK has been growing as a vehicle for building social housing where residents and local communities direct and manage development, and take the market out of the cost of housing. In a similar way, the Cohousing movement continues to grow internationally, where residents form neighbourhoods often using intentional or ecological principles to govern their own affairs. Many different types of low impact eco-settlements are emerging ranging from eco-towns to eco-villages to develop a more fine-grained approach to urban living where residents are attuned to reducing their ecological footprint (Jackson and Svensson, 2002; Scotthanson and Scotthanson, 2005; Pickerill and Maxey, 2009). Clearly, we need to be aware of the risks of new forms of eco-gentrification which simply exacerbate existing trends towards displacement, privatisation and inequality. Hodson and Marvin (2009) highlight the differences between, on the one hand, a more open and inclusive eco-urbanism based around cooperativism, communalism, retrofitting, social justice and affordability, and on the other, more closed versions which exacerbate trends towards gated and exclusive eco-urban settlements, controlled and built by corporate developers pursuing aggressive accumulation strategies, and new forms of neoliberal urban governance, surveillance and the control of urban space.

Many strands of the urban impossible also emerge from the most marginalised and excluded who actively build alternatives and manage their own affairs out of necessity and oppression. There is a long history of the dispossessed building their own housing and infrastructure through the emergence of self-managed squatter settlements (Wates, 1980; Corr, 1999). There are also inspiring examples of groups organising their own community services. In previous issues of *City* we have discussed the Black Panthers who pioneered revolutionary empowering community development and educational programmes in

urban North America; in Venezuela Urban Land Committees have demanded collective rights to unused private land; in Argentina the Unemployed Workers Movements have opened centres in abandoned banks and community centres; and in Brazil the Urban Landless Movement has demanded expropriation of land for homeless families. Moreover, broad-based community organising groups such as the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Gamaliel Foundation in the USA, and London Citizens and Change Makers in the UK, have mobilised urban residents around social justice issues and have taken on powerful vested interests to win important concessions. These kinds of initiatives can be key lines of defence to hold elites to account, and build counter-movements as powerful as local strategic alliances of policy-makers, politicians and developers (see Alinsky, 1972).

The city common and participatory democracy

The late Colin Ward, tireless advocate for an anarchist social policy and theory, stated ‘... the city is the common property of its inhabitants. It is, in the economic sense, a public good’ (1989, p. 1). As a public good, the city can also be understood as a common, a complex social ecology that is governed by and for its citizens to maximise internal democracy, well-being and flourishing (see de Angelis, 2007; Linebaugh, 2008). The common is not a simple project of welfarism or nationalisation. As Hardt and Negri (2009, p. ix) point out, the political project of instituting the common ‘cuts diagonally across these false solutions—neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist—and opens a new space for politics’. Building this kind of city common is part of the urban impossible. The city common does not just involve land and assets as common goods, but also its governance mechanisms. Policy and management options cannot be known or determined in advance of a commitment

to participation. They emerge from this commitment.

The challenge for the critical urbanist, then, is to build momentum and capacity for participatory forms of direct democracy which enshrine the right of all to equally participate in building (im)possible urban futures (see Bavo, 2007). There is a huge difference between present representative democracies, which are no more than liberal oligarchies (rule by the few) where the state guarantees the reproduction of the existing social and economic order through its legal monopoly on violence, and more direct participatory democracies. Building the latter needs a commitment to full and equal participation, which is a slow and difficult process. A variety of tools exist to make democracy more connected and accessible—citizen’s panels, neighbourhood assemblies, participatory budgeting and financial devolution to communities, consumer and producer councils, ordinances to limit the activities of corporations, media and news which is independent of corporate influence or advertising.

This is not just about giving the current system a make over. It is a radically different, people-centred, direct form of democracy, what Benjamin Barber (1984) called ‘strong democracy’ as opposed to the thin democracy we are all used to. Our yardstick becomes a process that has at its core the desire to empower the most marginalised citizens to determine and control their futures. Urban policy and politics is largely directed through local strategic partnerships drawing on a narrow range of stakeholders and elites to manage urban affairs and develop options for the future. Local government myopia and the dead hand of bureaucracy has long been the enemy of such participatory-led transformation. But participatory democracy is not a top-down vision developed by strategic partners, or an anointed elite. It is a vision which is created through an open and conflictual process which puts at its heart, for better or for worse, the participation of every person on an equal basis. It rejects the paternalism of

the urban great and the good, and instead rebalances power geometries so that all citizens have an equal say as experts in the unfolding story of their city. A further point is who gets to participate if we regard cities as relatively unbounded entities created through webs of relations that reach far and wide. City dwellers have responsibilities not just to other dwellers of the same city, but to those whose lives they impact upon beyond the city limits. Participatory democracy, then, cannot be conceived through bounded space. It is at once local and extra-local. What this means in practice is part of the process.

This kind of commitment to an open and participatory democracy is both risky and uncomfortable. It can evoke fear, both from the political Left and the Right, who are used to framing and controlling what is possible and quashing creativity and autonomy in order to maintain power (Duncombe, 2007). The urge to create more inclusive and radical forms of direct democracy challenges vested interests, and can trigger often violent reactions. Different visions can collide, and when they effectively mobilise significant people and resources on different sides social conflict, tension and repression can ensue. This is exactly what happened in Oaxaca City in Mexico in late 2006 when the Oaxacan Popular People’s Assembly (APPO) took over large parts of the city in response to the oppression by the state governor, only to face a brutal backlash from the police and military. We mustn’t hide from these realities. Working to build a different city may not be an entirely peaceful path. It is also a slow process that requires much educational groundwork as well as transparency towards the values that underpin it. Without a commitment to listening, tolerance, understanding and a protection of the most marginalised, participatory processes are seriously undermined. There also needs to be guarding against the emergence of new or invisible hierarchies.

So what does this participatory vision mean for Marcuse’s proposition of ‘expose,

propose, politise'? Exposing would be undertaken as a collective process of learning, involving researchers and the wider public, and embedded in listening and responding to desires, fears and hopes, and prioritising the most disenfranchised and marginal. As Marcuse has always stressed this must be critical and explore structural causes. But the strongest and most powerful analytics are those which emerge from co-inquiry with those most affected by change, and would explore key issues such as land, power and money. Popular education is key here that starts from daily realities but also takes people on a journey of self-realisation and critical awakening (see Freire, 1979). Propositions would emerge from this process of co-production, aimed at maximising a feeling of individual agency amongst the most disempowered. Politicising would be focused upon maximising well-being and the flourishing of individuals to determine their own lives, while at the same time embedding forms of participatory democracy which have a deep connection to cherished values such as dignity, justice and respect. What would result from such a process is largely unknown given that there are virtually no examples of such participatory urbanism in action. What is more certain is that they need to raise key issues of social justice and the deep class inequalities that shape our cities in terms of who is involved in governance, who has the right to participate, and who benefits from the allocations and functions of central urban space. Key issues that need to be further unravelled is who owns and controls land and assets, and how local, national and international capital and finance operate to shape cities. Who controls urban land and to what ends should be one of the key areas of urban inquiry in the coming decades. At its heart, then, the right to the city is the right to participate in its future creation. More than mere debates on the rights or wrongs of gentrification, we need a new vision of what a city could mean. Next time you go downtown look around and ask yourself: what impossible city do you see that doesn't yet exist?

References

- Alinsky, S. (1972) *Rules for Radicals*. London: Random House.
- Atkinson, A. (2007) "'Sustainable development" and energy futures', *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 11(2), pp. 201–213.
- Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) 'Beyond scholar activism: making strategic interventions inside and outside the neoliberal university', *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 9(2), pp. 245–275.
- Barber, B. (1984) *Strong Democracy. Participatory Politics for a New Age*. San Francisco: California Press.
- Bavo, ed. (2007) *Urban Politics Now. Re-imagining Democracy in the Neoliberal City*. Amsterdam: NAI Publishers.
- Best Foot Forward (2002) *City Limits: A Resource Flow and Ecological Footprint Analysis of Greater London*. Available at <http://www.citylimitslondon.com/>
- Bonefeld, W. (2008) *Subverting the Present. Imagining the Future. Insurrection, Movement, Commons*. London: Autonomedia.
- Bookchin, M. (1996) *Urbanization without Cities*. New York: Black Rose Books.
- Brenner, N., Marcuse, P. and Mayer, M. (2009) Cities for people, not for profit, *City* 12(2/3), pp. 177–184.
- Cleaver, H. (1993) 'Kropotkin, self-valorization and the crisis of Marxism', *Anarchist Studies* 2(2). Available at www.eco.utexas.edu/facstaff/Cleaver/Kropotkin.html (last accessed 30 August 2006).
- Conti, A. (2005) 'Metropolitan proletarian research'. Available at www.ecn.org/valkohaalarit/english/conti.htm
- Corr, A. (1999) *No Trespassing. Squatting, Rent Strikes, and Land Struggles Worldwide*. San Francisco: South End Press.
- Daly, H. (1980) *Economics, Ecology, Ethics: Essays toward a Steady-State Economy*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.
- De Angelis, M. (2007) *The Beginning of History*. London: Pluto.
- Duncombe, S. (2007) *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. London: New Press.
- Franks, B. (2003) 'Direct action ethic', *Anarchist Studies* 11(1), pp. 13–41.
- Freire, P. (1979) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Grosz, E. (1999) *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory and Futures*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Hamnett, C. (2009) The new Mikado? Tom Slater, gentrification and displacement, *City* 13(4), pp. 476–482.
- Hamnett, C. (2010) 'On gentrification. "I am critical. You are mainstream"', *City* 14(1/2), pp. 180–186.

- Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2008) 'The right to the City', *New Left Review*, 53, pp. 23–40.
- Hodson, M. and Marvin, S. (2009) "'Urban ecological security': a new urban paradigm?", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(1), pp. 193–215.
- Jackson, H. and Svensson, K. (2002) *Ecovillage Living. Restoring the Earth and her People*. Totnes: Green Books.
- Jackson, T. (2009) *Prosperity without Growth*. London: Earthscan.
- James, O. (2007) *Affluenza: How to be Successful and Stay Sane*. London: Vermillion.
- Kindon, S., Pain, R. and Kesby, M. (2007) *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*. London: Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (1972) *Le Droit à la ville: suivi de espace et politique*. Paris: Éditions Anthropos.
- Lerch, P. (2009) *Post Carbon Cities: Planning for Energy and Climate Uncertainty*. Post Carbon Institute.
- Linebaugh, P. (2008) *The Magna Carta Manifesto. Liberties and Commons for All*. London: Verso.
- Marcuse, P. (2009) 'From critical urban theory to the right to the city', *City* 13(2/3), pp. 185–197.
- Massey, D. (2004) 'Geographies of responsibility', *Geografiska Annaler* 86B, pp. 5–18.
- Mitchell, D. (2003) *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. London: Guilford Press.
- Monbiot, G. (2009) 'How much should we leave in the ground?', *Guardian Online*, 6 May.
- Neilson, B. and Rossiter, N. (2005) 'From precarity to precariousness and back again: labour, life and unstable networks', *Fibreculture Issue* 5, pp. 5–15.
- Pickerill, J. and Maxey, L., eds (2009) *Low Impact Development. The Future in our Hands*. Available at <http://lowimpactdevelopment.wordpress.com>
- Scottthanson, C. and Scottthanson, K. (2005) *The Cohousing Handbook. Building a Place for Community*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.
- Slater, T. (2009) 'Missing Marcuse: on gentrification and displacement', *City* 12(2/3), pp. 292–311.
- Slater, T. (2010) 'Still missing Marcuse: Hamnett's foggy analysis in London town', *City* 14(1), pp. 170–179.
- Smith, D. (2005) 'Studentification: the gentrification factory?', in R. Atkinson and G. Bridge (eds) *The New Urban Colonialism: Gentrification in a Global Context*, pp. 72–89. London: Routledge.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2009) 'The antinomies of the postpolitical city: in search of a democratic politics of environmental production', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(3), pp. 601–620.
- Ward, C. (1985) *When We Build Again. Let's have Housing that Works*. London: Pluto Press.
- Ward, C. (1989) *Welcome Thinner City*. London: Bedford Square Press.
- Ward, C. (1996) *Social Policy. An Anarchist Perspective*. London: Freedom Press.
- Wates, N. (1980) *Squatting. The Real Story*. London: Freedom Press.
- Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Allen Lane.

Paul Chatterton is Senior Editor of the journal City and is Reader in Cities and Social Change in the School of Geography at the University of Leeds, UK. See www.paulchatterton.com. Email: p.chatterton@leeds.ac.uk