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Revisiting The Emerging Lopsided City

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In: Dialogues in Urban Research

In the context of an ongoing conversation about cities and inequality, I offer a critical but not contrarian set of responses to the very generous commentaries provided by the five peer reviewers. I hope to use this space to both clarify and nuance some of my original provocations around the emerging lopsided city and the value of revisiting insights on inequality generated in the 1990s. Before I do, however, I think it might be appropriate to reach out to an allied concept lurking in the pages of *Dialogues in Urban Research* -the notion of 'Dracula urbanism' raised by Wilson and Wyly (2023). The premise that current city-building is vampiric is a useful complement to understanding how cities are becoming lopsided, and also connects to the longstanding and parallel exploitation that cities imposed on their hinterlands. The plunder of indigenous peoples or the ill-gotten proceeds from slavery showed up in powerful city fabrics in Old World cities – the vampiric yet gleaming facades of Bordeaux and Lisbon (Doel, 2017) – but also through the settler colonial city in the colonized world, from the gilded streets of Cartagena to the mansions of Savannah and the current exclusions of indigeneity in Canadian and Australian cities. And yet, the surplus that the powerful extract and deposit into the materiality of the city works the other way too, in that less powerful actors can 'skim' for their own survival – think of the thousands of low-skill workers who flood into gated communities in Brazil or South Africa every day to work, despite the ostensible intention of keeping them out.

The above deviation to vampiric urbanism can signpost that city fabrics are rarely monolithic; they are more than not impure and relational, and do not always accurately reflect either extreme, although sometimes they clearly do. Edensor (2005) talked about the material world as ordered in a particular way by the powerful and for the powerful, but that this social ordering is never complete, whether by the presence of the everyday city fabrics of ruins or the unruly presence of populations and fabrics that 'don't belong'. With this nuancing in mind, I have structured my responses according to the seven key legacies of the 1990s heyday on inequality. The first legacy was *an unadulterated class-driven analysis*, and here Dorling (2023) was quite strident about not treating all inequalities as the same (anymore than seeking equality never means treating all people the same), while warning of the perils of radically widening the number of inequalities that seems to come with greater privileges and wealth (for some). I certainly agree with this point, that we lose something in the transition towards a flattened set of inequalities. Specifically, we lose that razor-sharp focus on existential and frequently life-threatening conditions of going without, of extreme poverty in the face of smug wealth. The 1990s heyday understood that some inequalities matter more than others, particularly within the Anglo-American context of inexorably growing class divisions.

The second legacy was *an empirically rich approach*, the premise of which seems anodyne enough but of course represents a challenge to implement given shortened

research timelines that work against careful ‘slow scholarship’ (DeVerteuil, 2022a). The third legacy was on the *attention to the top-down, state-imposed nature of the city fabric*. Although this was not raised by the critics, I can make at least one further comment about it. The mega-city of Cairo that I pictured from above in 2008 is now undergoing recklessly destructive interventions to modernize its city fabric, as the national government embarks on a grandiose, perhaps bankrupting effort (Walsh & Yee, 2022). This government-imposed, top-down shift from everyday to powerful fabrics will inevitably and permanently lop-side the city, and suggests inspiration from places such as Dubai and Saudi Arabia.

The fourth legacy was an *attunement to the built environment*. Lobao (2023) wanted some clarification around the notion of ‘city fabrics’ that underpins much of my empirical discussion around lop-siding. She felt that the notion covered too much, and perhaps said too little about class matters in the 21st century city. I can temper the sense that ‘city fabrics’ are too capacious (and perhaps too superficial) by stating that while they cannot fully capture the myriad shifts in the class balance in cities, the emergence of more extreme versions of powerful fabrics in cities can be readily seen and understood. The pencil tower, or the destruction of social housing, both suggest a certain irreversibility of city fabrics that permanently favor the powerful. So, the architectural aesthetics of lopsidedness (Kirk, 2023) captures some aspects of the lopsided city but not all (see also Lauermann and Mallak, forthcoming).

Kirk (2023) further saw the need to attend to horizontality as well as verticality in the lopsided city, aligning with the realities of places like Los Angeles (although I would argue that Los Angeles has gone more vertical since the early 2010s, like many cities). I agree with this point, with the caveat that powerful horizontalities are certainly more difficult to visualize! I would add that my focus on verticality aligns with a volumetric perspective (McNeill, 2020) that frames verticality as the powerful spatially seceding from the rest of the city. Equally, the power to sprawl, to waste land rather than to decentralize or recentralize, is an important component of powerful city fabrics. Only very rich societies can spread out at will, a sort of horizontal secession. This horizontality becomes an even more powerful city fabric when it is protected from incursions and change. From the Bay Area to Nassau County on Long Island to Southern California, Australia and Canada, there is a spirited and predictable defense of class privilege, particularly the untouchable status of single-family homes, where local governments act like private clubs that keep out any class diversity or even population growth (Vojnovic et al, 2019; Hartt et al, 2022).

The fifth legacy was the epistemological stance of knowing cities more from their *totality than their fragments*. There are downsides to this, as both Bloch and Jupp note, especially when totalities are allied to particular metaphors that miss the ground-up production and use of everyday city fabrics. Here Jupp (2023) asks for more on the ‘small practices’ of the everyday, mundane city that work against the ‘big picture’ perspective that valorizes the powerful. I agree that my big picture perspective should not ignore the small practices, as long as the former perspective is also retained, a balance that I argue has been lost since the rise of more fragmentary perspective since the 1990s heyday. I further agree with the importance of the everyday state and its extensions into the voluntary sector, the

commons and social infrastructure, areas in which I have already published (DeVerteuil et al, 2022). I do not disagree with Bloch that the vernacular and the contested persist in the lopsided city, and I do not deny the existence of everyday fabrics, only argue that their position vis-à-vis the powerful fabrics has weakened of late, that the everyday is being permanently displaced via dramatic changes to the city fabric. This was certainly the point of the Shanghai vignette, but also in London and New York. Bloch is right to talk about how these vernacular spaces exist in the shadows, an insight that aligns with my own research on dissident spaces (DeVerteuil, 2022b) as well as my own personal experiences of living in the second half of the 1990s in Los Angeles, without the benefit of a car. I can only reiterate that some everyday fabrics are being displaced permanently, or are on borrowed time. The focus on the totality of city fabrics remains important within a context where much current research gravitates towards a celebration of fragmentation and minutiae.

The sixth legacy, on the *abiding concern for social justice*, certainly resonated with the reviewers. Lobao saw an extension towards rural places – of how the pandemic fuelled greater interest in certain rural locations, replicating the lopsided nature of cities further down the urban hierarchy. Moving from the intra-urban to the inter-urban, Kirk underlines the injustice around ‘left-behind’ cities that fall further behind the superstar ones. However, the pandemic also showed that some superstar cities were built on pillars of sand – witness the dramatic downfall of San Francisco’s Downtown since 2020.

The final legacy was *an enduring fascination with the extremes*. Such a fascination allows the urban observer to see the cutting edge of change, but it has its downsides as well. Lobao was concerned with the dualisms and binaries of the paper, a ‘dualistic heuristic’. Dividing cities into the everyday and powerful, as well as the corrugated and lopsided, may seem overly binarizing, but these extremes are also strongly related to each other. Both the corrugated and lopsided city are relational constructs that position everyday and powerful city fabrics in relation to each other. There is also an unsung middle ground between everyday and powerful fabrics (which I did not emphasize in this forum piece) where they exist alongside each other, and therefore point to the juxtaposed nature of both the corrugated and lopsided models that needs to be spelled out in more detail for future research, and with more focus on which methods are most suitable to capturing the in-between spaces, including ethnography (Jupp, 2023).

I finish my spirited defense of the 1990s heyday with a sense, as Dorling surely felt, of the passing of the guard. And yet the shelf life of concepts and insights generated 30 years ago can be gainfully extended through revisits and revisions such as my own, as well as attaching them to new metaphors around, namely, the corrugated and lopsided cities. The hope is to potentially bridge increasingly parallel ways of understanding cities. Looking back does not mean looking away from what is going on in cities today – quite the contrary.

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