

BOOK REVIEW

Colin McFarlane *Fragments of the City: Making and Remaking Urban Worlds*

FABIANA D'ASCENZO 



CONTRIBUTOR

Fabiana D'Ascenzo is a Lecturer in Human Geography at Cardiff University.

Address: School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, UK.

Email: dascenzof@cardiff.ac.uk

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Fragments of the City brings together slices of marginalised urban life from different cities in the Global South and North. The book hinges on the fragment, understood both in its concreteness, as an object or part of an object, and as a process. The fragment becomes the thematic core of the text and a generative tool, constituting an alternative for investigating the city in its conditions of inequality, practices of resistance, and possibilities for change. Colin McFarlane develops a methodological framework that privileges situated knowledge, utilising vignettes and juxtaposition to capture urban complexity through key empirical contributions, illustrating how fragments may become sites of political agency.

This approach resonates with innovative geographers who have experimented with fragments both in analysis and writing. For instance, Allan Pred (1995) uses literary montage, juxtaposing heterogeneous fragments and creating constellations of meaning between past and present; Tariq Jazeel (2019) engages with incomparable singularities, emphasising fragments as a means to preserve differences and multiplicity; Tatiana Thieme (2021) employs vignettes to focus on the discarded in peripheral areas' urban interstices, while Tim Cresswell (2019) uses juxtaposition to reflect on place as an assemblage. All these authors recognise the role of the fragment in the production of space and spatial analysis, and take inspiration from Benjamin's work in the *Arcades Project* (1999), which pioneered the montage of fragments as a method for understanding urban modernity and spatial experience.

McFarlane begins by considering materiality. The investigated cases of urban life become the starting point for exploring the apparent paradox of the urbanised world, which is simultaneously globalised and fragmented. The dimension of materiality is particularly significant, even when the reflection moves from the empirical to the theoretical or political level. Through a plurality of urban universes, which span Mumbai, Kampala, Berlin, New York, Dakar, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong, McFarlane observes and analyses community initiatives and practices of activism, protest, and art. He juxtaposes these everyday-life situations with vignettes that keep them distinct, preserving their singular nature and giving the discourse a discontinuous character. The fragment, therefore, also reveals itself as a methodology and a positioning: accepting partiality, the residual, what remains investigable and knowable, against the search for all-encompassing visions. The book is aimed at a diverse audience, including scholars and students of urban geography, urban anthropologists, planners, sociologists, and anyone interested in exploring urban marginality.

Fragmentation also occurs in the structure of the text; the seven sections that articulate it do not necessarily determine a sequential order but can be read independently. The only exception, as reported by McFarlane himself, is the opening section, 'Pursuing fragments', which introduces the book by illustrating McFarlane's understanding of the fragment and making explicit his focus on marginality. The discussion on fragmented urbanism at the margins of the world unfolds in the section 'Pulling together, falling apart', while the next one, 'Knowing fragments', considers fragments more theoretically. This is followed by a methodological part, 'Writing in fragments', which reflects on the use of fragmented urban writing forms and recalls other authors, with Walter Benjamin foremost among them. From

the perspective of the fragment, McFarlane's reflection seeks a way to go beyond academic scientific writing and account for the complexity of urban life; for this purpose, McFarlane illustrates the vignette, an impressionistic form whose potential is activated by juxtaposition.

The subsequent section, 'Political framings', is empirical and also the longest. McFarlane presents several case studies that typify the political dimension of the fragment, both as an outcome of processes of fragmentation generated by dominant structures and as a means of resistance by subaltern residents. The case study on sanitation in Mumbai examines the actors and dynamics at play around fragmented infrastructure, with the aim of repairing or improving it. Other case studies in Berlin, meanwhile, observe the organisation of a network that connects Syrian refugees and the creation of a platform for artists in exile; in these cases, the fragment concerns knowledge, and the infrastructure to be repaired is not material but social. These experiences in Mumbai and Berlin not only illustrate different cases of attending to fragments, but also highlight a not-so-obvious attitude. This is further exemplified by a case study in Cape Town, where fragments are transformed into objects of protest and refusal by residents.

Working with fragments does not necessarily mean stopping at the fragment. The text also considers how some policies that develop around fragmented urbanism are attentive to the processes that generate it. These practices of 'surveying wholes' revolve around data, rights, and state responsibilities, and can promote improvements by identifying gaps in planning. Furthermore, the analysis reveals the fragility of the balance between attending to policies, which risks underestimating fragmentation processes and failing to develop forecasting capabilities, and surveying policies, which risks detachment from the socio-material context.

Although the process of fragmentation is taken into consideration, McFarlane's interest is directed more towards the 'resistant' use of the fragment than towards the causes that generated it, and his analysis focuses on bottom-up practices and the policies that arise from them. This is the result of a scientific and political choice: McFarlane is aware that an in-depth analysis of the different fragmentation processes could contribute to forms of resistance based on capabilities of prevision, rather than as a reaction to already accomplished outcomes.

The methodological aspect returns in the 'Walking cities' section. Walking is a sensorial and contemplative experience that generates provisional and situated knowledge, offering an alternative perspective to that of conventional qualitative methods. It is a way to experience the city as an immersive and speculative experience, abstract and embodied, situated and in dialogue with other places and times. As its chapter title suggests, 'In completion' is the book's open-ended conclusion, projecting the possible contributions of this approach to urban challenges.

Fragments of the City is an invitation to look at the city no longer as a whole. After empirically observing the politics of the fragment, McFarlane juxtaposes these cases with vignettes as examples of the fragmentation of discourse. The desire to avoid transforming the fragment into something fixed or totalising permeates the text and is supported by the absence of a theoretical apparatus that, although recognisable, remains implicit. This absence, clearly deliberate, reinforces McFarlane's intention to stay grounded in the materiality of his case studies. This is one of the most valuable contributions of the work: the insistence on the concreteness of situations,

the singularity of cases, and the value of difference on which the power of the fragment is based.

The feeling of a lack of cohesion between the parts allows the reader to experience what the book examines: the need to connect the fragments. As in the analysed case studies, the use of fragments gives rise to new configurations, so *Fragments of the City* remains open to multiple interpretations. A pivotal point in McFarlane's reflection is that the fragment is generative not in itself, but precisely because it forces recontextualisations; it is here that its differential potential is revealed as a possible way to interpret the intricacy of urban life.

Competing interests

Fabiana D'Ascenzo was Co-Editor of Issue 1 of *Agoriad: A Journal of Spatial Theory*.

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