

From Fragments to Assemblage: An Interview With Professor Colin McFarlane

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ABSTRACT

This edited transcript presents an interview with Colin McFarlane, Professor of Urban Geography at Durham University, conducted by Emanuele Amo and Fabiana D'Ascenzo at the Gregynog Theory School, Gregynog Hall, Wales, on March 19, 2024. McFarlane discussed his theoretical and methodological approach to urban geography, considering fragmentation, inequality, social justice, and assemblage theory, whilst drawing on his fieldwork experiences. The conversation touched on the unequal power relations in these encounters and considered the potential of assemblage theory for understanding rural spaces and rural-urban interconnectedness. The audience contributed a series of pointed questions, further emphasising the complexity of this approach to fragmentation.



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Mae'r trawsgrifiad hwn, sy'n wedi'i olygu, yn cyflwyno cyfveliadau â Colin McFarlane, Athro mewn Daearyddiaeth Drefol ym Mhrifysgol Durham, a gynhaliwyd gan Emanuele Amo a Fabiana D'Ascenzo yn Ysgol Theori Gregynog, Neuadd Gregynog, ar Fawrth 19, 2024. Trafododd McFarlane ei ddull damcaniaethol a methodolegol o ymdrin â daearyddiaeth drefol, gan ystyried darnio, anghydraddoldeb, cyfiawnder cymdeithasol, a damcaniaeth gydosod, gan dynnu ar ei brofiadau'n gwneud gwaith maes. Yn ystod y sgwrs, trafodwyd y perthnasoedd anghyfartal o ran grym yn y cyfarfyddiadau hyn, ac ystyriwyd potensial defnyddio damcaniaeth gydosod i ddeall mannau gwledig a chyd-gysylltedd rhwng gwlad a thref. Cyfrannodd y gynulleidfa nifer o gwestiynau didwyll, gan bwysleisio ymhellach gymhlethdod y dull hwn o ystyried darnio.

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INTRODUCTION

We met Professor Colin McFarlane during the annual Theory School 2024 at Gregynog Hall, Newtown, Wales.¹ This gathering’s unique setting—immersed in intense discussion and collective reflection—provided the ideal backdrop for an in-depth conversation on his work and the key concepts that shape it. The interview revolves around fragments and assemblage as central concepts in McFarlane’s urban research. We explore his interest in fragments, its genesis from direct fieldwork observations across several cities in both the Global South and North, and how it extended from materiality to knowledge and writing. The conversation focuses on the unequal social and political relations in which fragments are embedded. It also highlights the importance of mapping the ecology of knowledge and practices that develop around fragments, involving different actors and power relations. The discourse on fragments continues through the discussion with the audience, highlighting the complexity and nuance of his approach to the process of fragmentation. In particular, the questions that emerge emphasise the political dimension of fragmentation research and the contextual nature of his political positioning. They address methodological challenges such as defining the boundaries of fragments, the question of scale and nested fragmentation. Indeed, these factors can make visible certain urban realities whilst potentially obscuring others.

In the interview, McFarlane also reflects on his early research and relationship to conceptual frameworks. In particular, he illustrates his application of assemblage theory on urban governance and social justice. He considers whether assemblage was a lens brought to cities or one that emerged from the encounter with spatial and political complexities, and he offers broader reflections on how theory appears in, and is shaped by, empirical contexts. The conversation then turns to how assemblage and translocality, while rooted in urban theory, have travelled into other spatial contexts, specifically rural geographies. McFarlane discusses the productive tensions involved in translating these frameworks beyond the urban, opening questions about what kinds of relational thinking rurality might call for. In doing so, the interview touches on the potential of adapting urban theory to different spatial imaginaries and modes of life.

As researchers attuned to the epistemological tensions of critical inquiry, we are drawn to fragments not only as material remnants, but as critical apertures – ways of knowing that unsettle both the illusion of coherence and the illusion of stability. For those who endure spatial injustice, particularly subaltern groups, the residual nature of certain fragments is precisely what can guarantee their accessibility, allowing for practices of appropriation, adaptation and use. From a research perspective, focusing on the incomplete and the mutable is not only a gesture of humility toward the contingent terrain of everyday life, but also an opening toward a different analytical stance – one more attuned to processes of becoming than to the sedimentation and fixation of thought. In this sense, assemblage becomes more than a heuristic; it is a political sensibility, one that resists closure and emphasises the relational, unstable, and often contested nature of urban worlds.

INTERVIEW PROCEEDINGS

Fabiana D’Ascenzo [FD]: I would like to open with a couple of questions about your interest in fragments. When did this interest begin? Where did it come from?

Colin McFarlane [CM]: There is an event that stands out in my mind, which is the Royal Geographical Society's annual conference in I think 2014, and a session organised by Stephen Legg and Tariq Jazeel on Subaltern Geographies. I had a growing recognition that the work I was doing, and that I was interested in, was not so much on urban infrastructure, which is how I usually describe my work. When somebody asked me what I was working on, I would stumble around urban infrastructure, sanitation, water, housing, and poor neighbourhoods, but I realised that when I spoke to residents in places like Mumbai and elsewhere, often people would talk about experiences with broken infrastructure. This literally implies pieces of infrastructure that were not working, for instance bits of water pipes from the house used to fill a gap in a toilet. These fragments, and the stories around them, were important to people on a day-to-day basis, to keep basic infrastructures functioning.

At some point, it dawned on me that given that the materiality of what I was looking at was often broken, inadequate, and insufficient, it made more sense to talk about the fragments rather than the infrastructure. At the same time, I was always interested in how postcolonial theorists, especially the subaltern studies school, people like Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992), for example, would talk about fragments of knowledge in their writing, and point to knowledge forms which may be outside of conventional ways of talking about history, politics, or the state in relation to anti-colonial struggle, in particular in India. I was interested in that.

I remember one occasion, I was doing research with colleagues Renu Desai and Stephen Graham in a neighbourhood called Rafinagar, northeast Mumbai, a poor neighbourhood on the edge of the city, and there was a toilet block run by a private company that was always breaking down. It was never quite reliable, and the caretaker, on behalf of the private company, decided to increase the costs of this toilet. So, each time somebody used the toilet, they had to pay double: not one, but two rupees, and the caretaker made cash. I remember there were a lot of protests and debates in disagreement with this. A group of women, having tried to speak to the local municipal corporator and local NGOs, and finding that there was no way to resolve the situation, threatened to use the area around the toilet as a toilet. It was not something that a woman would do individually in that kind of context, but as a collective, they were saying to the caretaker: 'We are going to use this space as a toilet'. This is a really desperate politics of last resort, and the result was that the company changed their mind and kept the cost of the toilet block as it was.

I remember thinking, at the time about these episodic moments of protest, which can come and go, and do not quite fit standard narratives of the urban political. I was thinking about politics in the neighbourhood, civil society organisations campaigning, negotiating with the local government, and trying to find better access to infrastructures that did not simply connect with those models of politics. Sudipta Kaviraj used the term 'small rebelliousness' (1997: 110), little moments where people, in India, use their bodies, the politics of smell, and the politics of visual disturbance to shift the dial on conditions and make a change. During that moment I thought about how politics and change might get done in a way which does not fit with conventional stories around civil or political society, to use Partha Chatterjee's terms (2004), but I also thought about this broken, inadequate landscape.

FD: Despite the word fragments evoking something small—a bit, a particle, a scrap—reading your works, we understand that behind it there is a big concept. It may refer to several perspectives and can be considered at different levels. Can you tell us what a fragment can be?

CM: Conventionally, we tend to think of fragments as pieces that come from a whole, something that is broken off. The term fragment is often connected to an image of the museum, a piece of a broken vase, or parchment. Obviously, for people who are working in disciplines which deal with ancient history, archaeology, the classics or paleontology, fragments are linked to disciplinary work, and they are what survive. Things do not survive intact from the past; they come to us broken, in bits and pieces, and are reconstructed, materially and socially, in all kinds of ways. I think that the conventional notion of the fragment carries that sense of antiquity.

As I said earlier, I started thinking about material fragments, in particular in relation to infrastructure. Initially, I considered them as sort of broken-off bits and pieces, bits of broken water infrastructure or toilet infrastructure, but also as pieces that were brought to an object or process in order to maintain it. For instance, in anticipation of the monsoon, people find a piece of corrugated metal that might be used to reinforce the roof, because it stops the rain getting in, or it might be all the mundane ways in which bits of materials are plugging different kinds of gaps in housing or infrastructure. I started to think about fragments as found objects that were repurposed, remade in some way, and I became quite interested in that sense of remaking and less in the materiality of the fragment *per se*.

I am more interested in how fragments are enrolled in certain social or political relations. How is a fragment put to work? How is this piece of corrugated metal, which came from an industrial site, now functioning as a roof repair job? Or how is this piece of plastic, that was previously something the kids were playing with, now being used to improve the flow of water, in a water pipe in a settlement in northeast Mumbai? I was interested in repurposing the mundane, and that relationship—the social and material relationship—became more interesting than the fragment itself or its materiality. In terms of material fragments, I guess there are two elements to keep in mind. One relates to bits and pieces of objects which might be broken off, might be found, and the other is around material forms which begin life as a functioning whole. For instance, toilet infrastructure, electricity infrastructure, and water infrastructure are often built as functioning ‘wholes’, but over time, in the context of a neighbourhood, they can become inadequate in some way and stop functioning. The electricity keeps going off, the toilet doors are unhinged, the kids cannot use them, women do not like using them at night because of who is hanging around them, and the water infrastructure dries up. They become fragments over time in that sense.

For some people this is probably stretching the definition of the material fragment too far, but I decided I would work with an expansive notion of the material fragment to try and capture the range of things that were seen in the neighbourhoods where I was working, and to think about knowledge fragments as ways of knowing urban space, which might be less mainstream. For example, that little protest I talked about earlier, through which people put knowledge to work to get things to happen. And then, I started to think about writing and fragments, as well; so that was the start of what became a quite expansive project.

FD: The next thing I would like to discuss concerns methods. How does your interest in fragments translate into empirical questions or fieldwork? Have you developed specific methods that help you focus on or understand fragments?

CM: I applied fragments retrospectively to the work I was doing. I did not go to research fragments; it was something that came to me overtime. I do not think I ever designed this method or anything similar. I do not know if there is a particular set of methods that are more adequate; I guess it depends on what one is talking about. To take the example of material fragments, if we are looking at a piece of water pipe that has been put to work in a neighbourhood, that fragment of plastic means very different things to different people. There are the residents who use it, the municipal engineers who encounter it, the politicians who might try to exploit it for electoral gain, and the activists who build campaigns around it; therefore, there are different relationships and different kinds of work being done in relation to this fragment, which, of course, are conducted in a field of unequal power relations, as the resident, for instance, has a lot less power than the local municipal corporator.

Fragments are known and used in different ways, and one of the things I have always tried to do in my work, methodologically, is to speak to the range of encounters that fragments imply: what are the relationships of the municipal corporators, residents, and engineers to this fragment? Going through that ecology of forms of knowledge and practice around the fragment, trying to explore those relations, would probably be mostly how I worked in relation to this, even before I was using the term fragment.

In relation to some of the knowledge fragments, during this Theory School, we will be discussing Tariq Jazeel's work (2019). Concerning his work in Sri Lanka, for example on Buddhism (Jazeel 2013; 2018), Tariq has long argued that if you want to understand ways of knowing religion, beyond the inherited Enlightenment's conceptions of what religion is, immersed in Anglo-American theory cultures, you need to spend significant time there. He talks about this in relation to abiding by a place, committing yourself to and immersing yourself in that place. This lends itself to the image of long-term ethnography. It might be that in particular in relation to knowledge fragments, that you need that kind of longer engagement; at least this would be, I think, Tariq's argument. At the same time, I think that privileging of time can be overstated—the idea that the longer you spend in a place, the better your understanding will be—when the entire history of geography is littered with people who spent years in places consistently misunderstanding them in often quite dangerous and violent ways. There is an assumption that we are too ethical to do that because we have worked out what it means to spend time productively in a place, but I am not sure I am convinced of it.

Or, we might think about archival work, with respect to the subaltern studies tradition, that is trying to read archives against the grain and finding other ways of knowing, in the archive, but also by reading the present and the past outside of the archive through different cultural repertoires. It might reveal different kinds of knowledge fragments—festivals, protests, poetry, drama, etc.—beyond the archive, and the different methodological implications, perhaps, in different political problems.

FD: I would like to move on to writing now, because as a central concern in your work, the fragment is a lens that informs your methodology and has an impact on your writing. Can you tell us something about the relationship between fragments and writing?

CM: I really did not set out to write this book about fragments: *Fragments and the City* (McFarlane 2021). I wrote the first draft of the book years ago, and it was written in conventional chapters. There were seven chapters, and they were about 7,000 or 8,000 words each. I remember sending it to the editor of the University of California Press, who had expressed interests in the book, and we had a good chat on the phone about it. I remember her saying: 'This feels like six or seven papers you might send to a journal like *Urban Studies*, and that you have stitched them together as a book, which is fine, but why do you want to do it that way? Rather than just papers, there is a way of writing differently'. That was a provocation, I suppose, so I started to think: 'If the book is about fragments, and we had this conversation, why not write it in fragments?' And the intellectual justification for trying to do that was: if you write in a fragmented form, does that reinforce the argument about the fragmented urban world that you are trying to build? Is there something about the form reinforcing the content for the reader?

That was the question, but I am not sure what the answer to that is. The motivation was more mundane; it was about being excited by that conversation and thinking about it. I often write quite conventionally. I have been an academic since I did a PhD in 2004, and almost everything I have ever written has been an 8,000-word paper or a big chapter. It has been quite formulaic: the introduction, literature review, methodology, case study, analysis, and conclusion. There are reasons why that convention persists: it works. It is a good amount of space to put together a complicated argument; the structure is one thing we have learnt, and I am comfortable with it. So, it was partly to try something new; I wanted to know if I was able. I tried something different, and experimented with an alternative form of writing, but I am not sure how distinct it really turned out to be; some of the little vignettes are quite long in the book, and some of them are shorter, but I tried to do something different.

There are lots of different ways to write in fragments. We are gathering as a group for a few days at the Gregynog Theory School to read and discuss a body of work; we are going to find out different ways of doing that. One of the things that I was aware about writing, for example, is that there is a way in which some writers work in fragments, playing with font and punctuation – Allan Pred (1990), for instance, one of the people who we are going to read. Moreover, there is a way in which some writers present different sources of knowledge: Tim Cresswell's book *Maxwell Street* (2019), that we are going to engage with, presents different styles. Those are quite different fragment styles from the thing I ended up doing in the book, which does not do that kind of experimentation. People who know my previous work would probably describe me as quite conventional in that sense. There are all kinds of ways in which that genre has been experimented with and pushed, which are really exciting.

Emanuele Amo [EA]: I would like to talk now about assemblage theory and then return to some of your earlier work. My question concerns the relationship between theory and space: specifically, the connection between assemblage and the city of Mumbai. I am curious: did you approach Mumbai already thinking through the lens of assemblage theory, or did your experience in the city prompt you to adopt that theoretical framework? More broadly, what is the relationship between appearance and theory in your work?

CM: I think probably fieldwork itself has provoked a certain way of thinking about urbanism. It is difficult to know, because you do not go into the field

as a kind of blank canvas and then your fieldwork populates your thinking. It is much messier; it happens over many years and there are all kinds of encounters and conversations with people in places. So, it is always hard to know what the origin of theory is, and it is just not neat in that sense. I think that I have a general way of thinking about urbanism: I am interested in writing about urbanism through entanglements of social, material, and translocal relations.

My PhD was about housing and infrastructure in Mumbai; I was looking at a translocal movement of slum dwellers called Slum Dwellers International that works in 35 different countries, organising housing and infrastructure provision.² From the very beginning of my PhD, my work engaged with the social and material dimensions of housing infrastructure. I was conducting research on people living in low-income neighbourhoods who were involved in activities like the repair, inspection, and construction of urban fabric. At the same time, they were consistently drawing on ideas from a transnational network. For example, the work they were doing might be shaped by the fact that, just the week before, they had been on a visit to Cape Town in South Africa and had a conversation about how the state was providing housing there – how the formal systems were failing, what people were doing to circumvent them, and how such lessons might be brought back and applied in Mumbai. That sense of translocality became embedded in the everyday practices—experimentation, improvisation, and even campaigning with the state. So, whether it is assemblages or fragments or density, I think those kinds of concepts emerge from that way of thinking about urbanism. They are about trying to grasp the relationships that make things happen, and asking: ‘How are things made and remade, *in situ*?’ One of the criticisms of that way of thinking about urbanism is often that it is too loose—that there is not enough attention to the dominant diagrams of power: ‘Who are the key actors? Does this approach diminish, for example, the role of political economy or cultural politics in its desire to map the broader ecology of relations around the fragment, or within the assemblage—wherever that might be?’

On the question of appearance—if I understand you correctly—there is a tendency, I suppose, in that line of critique to suggest that this way of thinking about urbanism is overly focused on what things look like. Not in terms of aesthetic qualities, but in terms of simply describing what is there. It is about describing the appearance of things, whereas what we need to understand is the kind of reality behind that. The kind of critical realist position would be: ‘What are the political economies that are shaping this? What are the key drivers?’ What I have always tried to ask is: ‘Can we find ways of identifying those key drivers within translocal social-material practices – within the very appearances, and the actors and relations around them?’ I think that is probably something of a point of contention when it comes to this way of thinking about urbanism.

EA: I am going to ask one question about rural-urban relations. I am asking this because I imagine many people in this room identify themselves as rural geographers, or at least as researchers working in rural areas and with rural communities. In contrast, it seems to me that you are a pure urban geographer – you consistently focus on urban areas and urban spaces, and you are not afraid to recognise the divide between the urban and the rural. That is interesting, because it is a division that many geographers are increasingly challenging.

So, my question is this: your interpretation of translocality and assemblage has also been taken up by geographers working on rural spaces. In your opinion, what differences and similarities should be considered when applying your theoretical perspectives to rurality? What limits and what potential do you see in this process of adaptation—but also of translation?

CM: The work I have been discussing—fragments, infrastructures, assemblages, and some of the issues I have raised—are not empirical phenomena or processes specific to the urban context. You find all these processes in rural areas. If you think about infrastructural breakdowns and fragmentations, where parts break off and things become inadequate, rural areas often experience many of these problems in ways that many urban areas do not. So, I would not make a strict empirical distinction between urban and rural areas in that sense. The main difference, I would say, is the intensification of these processes in urban areas, which emerge from the sheer density of activity and interactions happening there. So, yes, density—of people, of things, but also density of activities. There is this intensive heterogeneity of actors, knowledge, and ways of doing things that interact with each other, contest each other, and sometimes contradict one another.

It is also important to consider the notion of background. There is a great book by AbdouMalik Simone called *The Surrounds* (2022), where he reflects on the idea of the ‘surrounds’ in urban environments—a constellation of relationships, people, activities, and social, economic, and political dynamics that often operate in the background. In many of the urban contexts AbdouMalik has worked in, these surrounds are constantly being drawn upon by inhabitants, sometimes in ways that end up being detrimental to the people involved, and often in highly unequal or precarious ways. Yet, they are also put to work in all sorts of mundane, everyday practices: as people search for jobs, try to improve local infrastructure, gain access to housing, or connect with organisations in the hope of getting something done, or simply in the hope that something might happen in the future. For me, that is a good definition of what a city is.

And from that perspective, I think there is much to learn across urban and rural spaces. The distinction between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ geographies is in some ways an artifice. The idea that the theoretical insights generated in one space should remain confined to it does not really hold. I am not sure if there is any good reason for that kind of separation.

Q1 (Audience): Is not the aim of the research to see fewer fragments and fewer incidents of breakdown? Or is there also a political ambition to create a different, more holistic social whole?

CM: It is interesting, because much of the work I am doing involves different ways of talking about fragments in cities. Cities are full of all kinds of fragments, and we encounter them all the time. I am not arguing against fragments or taking an anti-fragment position; I am focusing on very particular contexts. Empirically and politically, my interests are in low-income neighbourhoods that often face severe shortages in basic provisions such as housing, infrastructure, and so on. In those contexts, I am advocating for some coherence, structure, or wholeness. Take something like sanitation, for example: I believe that access to sanitation for all is a universal right.

Many of the activists I have spoken with in different cities, as discussed in the book *Waste and the City* (McFarlane 2023), are campaigning with local government to have sanitation delivered across the city—regardless of ethnicity, religion, caste, or any other social division. I am fully behind that.

In the book, I try to see that much of what we can learn about the politics of fragments comes from the activists themselves, who are doing the work on the ground. They move between managing the fragments *in situ*, within neighbourhoods, and the city as a whole. Their work involves making claims on the city to provide sanitation for all across the city. That movement between the fragment and the whole is something that activists can often intuitively just do. So, there are things we can learn there from how they do that work, and that is the politics of the book to some extent.

Now, that is very different, for example, from the discussion around refugees, which I explore in the *Fragments* book in relation to Berlin, where the argument that refugees should integrate into the whole is often culturally very dominant. It is a discourse shaped by the idea that 'these people from foreign countries are not behaving in ways that we would like them to behave'. That reflects a politics of control, of stigmatisation – all the dynamics we are familiar with. That is not a politics of the whole that I would want to be arguing for. It depends on what kind of whole we are talking about, and what kind of politics are built around it.

Q2 (Audience): Empirically, how do you define the edge of a fragment?

CM: I do not have a definitive answer to that question, because physically, I do not think anything I am arguing implies that a fragment should be small. There is a common assumption that fragments are small, but you can have quite large constructions which are never complete. So, I do not see any conceptual reason why a fragment should be tied to a particular scale. As I mentioned earlier, I am more interested in how fragmented elements become caught up in different social and political relationships. The challenge for me has been less about defining the limits of the fragment itself, and more about understanding where the relationships surrounding it end. Therefore, the question becomes: When do I stop interviewing the range of possible groups who have some stake or influence on this water pipe, or that sanitation system or this housing area, wherever it might be? My tendency has been to try to focus on specific sites and to try to do some drawing of the larger city into that fragment: a particular house, a particular toilet block that becomes my empirical focus on the fragment. From there, I try to draw in this range of other actors and that is when it spirals a little bit and becomes difficult to contain.

Q3 (Audience): My question is perhaps not in the context of the boundaries of the fragment but the levels of the fragment. You mentioned the example of the toilet in Mumbai and that the tendency of people to use the surroundings of the toilet had the effect that the price was not increased by the service provider. My question is: Are there other fragments within the fragment? Are other fragments all the things that are happening within the fragment that we are studying? Are you considering that in your research?

CM: That is interesting, because I suppose there is always a risk—as in the story I mentioned about the toilet-block protest—of reducing or caricaturing the actions of a particular group. The caretaker and the private company can end up being portrayed as a single actor with a single aim, and the women protesting as another single actor with one aim. But in reality, there are all kinds of social differences at play – different positions, arguments, views, objectives. In that sense, there are fragments within the fragments. And those fragments are themselves in the process of coming to a position—whether it is deciding to increase the price of using the toilet or using the bodies as a protest vehicle. There is a domination of one fragment over the others, in the sense that a decision is made about how the collective

should act, but I think there are other parts of my work where I have tried to explore something similar—even if I have not described it as ‘fragments within fragments’. One example might be community-based organisations and NGOs working in the Rafinagar neighbourhood. In work with Renu Desai and Stephen Graham I have observed how, in some cases, particular voices or positions come to dominate the debate, while others are sidelined or marginalised in various ways. That would probably be the sort of way in which I would pick up on that.

I think it is an important question I had not thought about. It is also a question of scale. You see a particular fragment that you are interested in and that is the story you want to tell. You do not see all the other fragments that are going on around you—that in a sense is the problem of methodology in general; we see certain things and not others. It is a bit like that story about a carpenter who brings a hammer to every single job. I am seeing fragments, but quite particular fragments, and not others. If you wrote the book that I wrote, you would probably write a very different story. If you have gone to the places I have gone to, you would see very different fragments. And there is a politics involved in how we write about place, how we represent places, and in what that means for what becomes visible and what remains unseen. I think that is really important. I would just state the problem and leave it at that.

Ethics and Consent

Not applicable.

Authors' Contributions

The interview was conducted and transcribed by Emanuele Amo and Fabiana D'Ascenzo, and edited in collaboration with Colin McFarlane.

Competing Interests

Emanuele Amo is Co-Editor of this Issue, and Fabiana D'Ascenzo was Co-Editor of Issue 1 of Agoriad: A Journal of Spatial Theory.

NOTES

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² Slum Dwellers International: <https://sdinet.org/>

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AGO RIAD

A Journal of Spatial Theory

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

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