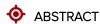# Knowing Through Fragments: Universalism and Urban Inequality?

DONGYANG MI, (iD) XINYUE DONG, (iD) XIAOWEN ZHAN, (iD) & COLIN MCFARLANE (iD)

ABSTRACT

This article critically engages with the urban theory workshop delivered by Professor Colin McFarlane in his keynote address, 'Knowing through Fragments: Universalism and Urban Inequality?', at the University of Manchester on 6 June 2025. The article is organised in two parts. The first part offers a concise exposition of McFarlane's insights and seminal contributions to global urbanism, transversal urbanism, and the theorisation of fragments, demonstrating how these concepts reconfigure theoretical and epistemological debates between universalist and transversal approaches in urban studies. The second part presents an edited transcript of the post-keynote dialogue between the audience and McFarlane, mapping the questions, critiques, and exchanges on the meaning, causes, and implications of urban fragments. By juxtaposing the keynote with the ensuing discussion, the article highlights McFarlane's insights on theorising fragments for understanding the relationalities between universalism and particularism, contributing to future urban theorising and research on urban inequality.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dongyang is a PhD Candidate in a joint-PhD programme between the Universities of Manchester and Melbourne, Xinyue is a PhD Candidate in Planning, Property, and Environmental Management at the University of Manchester, and Xiaowen is a PhD researcher in Human Geography at the University of Manchester. Colin McFarlane is Professor of Urban Geography at Durham University.

Emails: dongyang.mi@manchester.ac.uk;
xinyue.dong@manchester.ac.uk;
xiaowen.zhan@manchester.ac.uk;
colin.mcfarlane@durham.ac.uk

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Mae'r erthygl hon yn mynd i'r afael yn feirniadol â'r gweithdy theori drefol a gyflwynwyd gan yr Athro Colin McFarlane yn ei brif anerchiad, 'Knowing through Fragments: Universalism and Urban Inequality?', ym Mhrifysgol Manceinion ar 6 Mehefin 2025. Mae'r erthygl wedi'i threfnu'n ddwy ran. Mae'r rhan gyntaf yn cynnig esboniad cryno o wybodaeth a chyfraniadau arloesol McFarlane at drefolaeth fyd-eang, trefolaeth drawsgyfeiriol, a theorïau darnau, gan ddangos sut mae'r cysyniadau hyn yn ail-lunio dadleuon theoretig ac epistemolegol rhwng dulliau cyffredinol a thrawsgyfeiriol mewn astudiaethau trefol. Mae'r ail ran yn cyflwyno trawsysgrifiad wedi'i olygu o'r ddeialog ar ôl y prif anerchiad rhwng y gynulleidfa a McFarlane, gan osod yn glir y cwestiynau, y beirniadaethau a'r cyfnewidiadau ar ystyr, achosion a goblygiadau darnau trefol. Drwy gyfosod y prif anerchiad a'r drafodaeth ddilynol, mae'r erthygl yn tynnu sylw at ddeialltwriaeth McFarlane o lunio theorïau am ddarnau er mwyn deall y berthynas rhwng cyffredinoliaeth a neilltuoldeb, gan gyfrannu at lunio theorïau trefol yn y dyfodol a chyfrannu at ymchwil i anghydraddoldeb trefol.

INTRODUCTION

Urban studies scholars have long navigated between universalising approaches, aiming to identify general patterns and commonalities across cities, and particularist approaches that emphasise the contingencies and specificities of place, history, and socio-political context (Parnell & Robinson 2017; Murray 2022). Recent debates have increasingly converged on 'the relations between global abstraction and local particularism', particularly in relation to theorisation and concept formation (McFarlane 2025b: 100). As Parnell and Robinson (2017: 13) argue, any attempt to 'understand the significance of an urban world bring to the fore the tension between specificity (or difference) and universality in conceptualising the urban'. This article engages with these debates through a keynote address by Professor Colin McFarlane (Durham University), titled 'Knowing through Fragments: Universalism and Urban Inequality?', delivered at *The Universal and the Particular* workshop (University of Manchester, 6 June 2025). It affords a timely opportunity to revisit, rethink and critically engage these debates.

The first part of the article summarises the keynote's core arguments. McFarlane interrogates contemporary debates on global urbanism, transversal urbanism, and the urbanism of fragments. Rather than offering a fixed definition of global urbanism, he deliberately steps back from rigid categorisation, instead advocating for an approach that embraces a plurality of interpretations. He calls for a grounded engagement of knowledge productions and theorising the city that speaks through, rather than over, the lived experiences of diverse urban contexts (see also Acuto et al. 2021). In this regard, he then theorises on/in/with fragments—which he refers to as 'verbs'—as both empirical and epistemic devices for understanding urban inequalities (McFarlane 2018; McFarlane 2021). While recognising the presence of shared, universal processes, McFarlane emphasises the situated, particularist, and often contradictory nature of infrastructures, cities, and urban life. He positions transversal framing as offering a novel perspective for reconciling universalism (e.g. universal claims) with the particularities of place-specific contexts (Lancione & McFarlane 2021).

The second part of the paper presents an edited transcript of the post-keynote dialogue between McFarlane and the audience. The conversation explores the methodological, historical, and political understandings of fragments and transversal urbanism. For example, in response to whether fragments—ranging from infrastructure to street murals—are shaped by universal forces or local conditions, McFarlane emphasises the need to consider global processes (such as neoliberalism) and place-based histories. The dialogue further addresses the historical and archival dimensions of fragments, the fragmentations of infrastructure, and the politics of visibility in protest and activism (see also McFarlane & Silver 2017). McFarlane reflects on how fragments carry temporal and spatial depth, and how urban fragments can both oppress and empower. He highlights the need for conceptual flexibility, ethical writing, and interdisciplinary learning and advocating for an urban theory that embraces ambiguity, positionality, and generative potentials (McFarlane 2018).

This article acknowledges the significance of McFarlane's work on the theorisation of fragments, global urbanism, and transversal urbanism. These concepts offer a fertile foundation for future theoretical, epistemological, methodological, and empirical research on the geographies of urban

inequality, offering a means to mediate universalism and particularism in critical urban theory. We elaborate below.

GLOBAL URBANISM: MULTIPLICITY AND TRANSVERSALISM

> *'So, we see global urbanism not as a fixed or definable term, but as an invitation to begin thinking, particularly about the relationship between the urban, the global, and knowledge, or ways of knowing. So, it's a placeholder'.*

McFarlane (2025a)

McFarlane begins his lecture by discussing the collaborative volume *Global Urbanism* (co-edited with Michele Lancione), highlighting its deliberate strategy of leaving the term 'global urbanism' undefined (Lancione & McFarlane 2021). This aligns with Robinson and Roy's (2016) view of global urbanism as 'an analytical project' (p.182) aimed at understanding the urban across diverse formations. McFarlane describes it as 'strongly revisable, open, diverse and non-singular, differentiated, fractured, even disjunct or contradictory' (McFarlane 2025 a), emphasising its radical multiplicity and its resistance to singular or narrow theoretical frameworks. This aims to engage with particularities rather than reduce differences to a universal rhetoric.

He suggests that global urbanism should be understood as a field of *additionality*: constantly additive, revisable, and continually expanding by bringing new concerns, questions, and forms of knowledge into its orbit, rather than something that is 'pinning down' and thereby operationalised in fixed and narrowly prescribed ways (Lancione & McFarlane 2021, original emphasis). From this perspective, McFarlane advocates openness and diversification in how global urbanism is used, not only as a tool for knowledge production but also as knowledge and its various manifestations in urban politics or a mode of political engagement. This is reflected in the *Global Urbanism* book (Lancione & McFarlane 2021), which includes contributions from activists and non-academics involved in urban projects. McFarlane highlights how the concept of global urbanism can function as a political device, rather than being reduced to narrow interpretations as merely an 'epistemology of epistemologies' or a 'grammar of grammars' (McFarlane 2025a; see also Amin & Lancione, 2022). Put differently, he cautions against treating global urbanism as a meta-framework that merely catalogues other ways of knowing cities or as a universal syntax that seeks to standardise urban vocabulary, both of which risk detaching urban theory from grounded, lived experiences. By contrast, McFarlane calls for a more open, politically engaged, and situated understanding of global urbanism that embraces multiplicity and lived realities.

The production of knowledge in global urbanism, McFarlane suggests, should create space to accommodate and engage with diversity, and to explore the tensions, multiplicities, and limitations inherent in theorising about cities, urbanisation, and urbanism. He frames such an approach as a form of minor theory: a mode of theorising that does not aspire to grand universality but instead foregrounds grounded, local, and plural investigations. This perspective generates new ways of seeing and thinking, especially through transversal connections that cut across spaces, issues, and concerns that are deeply rooted in particular settings, yet also resonate across multiple urban contexts globally (McFarlane 2025b).

THINKING THE URBAN THROUGH FRAGMENTS

'Fragments, then, are not merely nouns—static elements in the urban landscape—but verbs: they do things. They are active agents in shaping the city, participating in the making of urban life'.

Mcfarlane (2025a)

Central to McFarlane's argument is his conceptualisation of 'fragments', which he views not merely as contextual elements, but as active arenas that shape how we think and perceive urban life. In this view, fragments represent socio-material translocal urbanism in which a mode of thinking and seeing connects the global to the particular in multiple and dynamic ways (McFarlane 2011; McFarlane 2021). He vividly demonstrates residents in very low-income neighbourhoods—initially in parts of Asia, and later in parts of Africa—who widely engage in improvisational practices using the material fragments of everyday life. Rather than seeing these practices as isolated or purely local, he argues that even in these socio-material engagements on the margins of the city, residents are participating in a broader translocal and global urbanism. Fragments, in this sense, are not just objects or residues; they are generative, connecting disparate urban experiences and scales (see also McFarlane 2018).

McFarlane conceptualises fragments as 'verbs': not merely static things, but dynamic processes that *do work* (McFarlane 2021). These fragments themselves are always interactive, serving as sites from which to understand the making and remaking of urban life in the context of inequality. They are entangled with the practices of residents, activists, artists, geographers, and others in diverse and situated ways. He positions fragments and 'fragmented' elements of urban life as a kind of living archive of global urbanism (McFarlane 2025b): in city after city, one encounters material fragments—improvised, reassembled, or repurposed—that are deeply particular in their local configuration, yet simultaneously resonate with broader global narratives about the urban condition. Fragments, then, generate new ways of seeing, acting as both material expressions and epistemic traces of the uneven and interconnected processes that shape cities today.

To illustrate this, McFarlane draws on detailed case studies from diverse urban contexts (McFarlane 2025a):

- *Mumbai:* In informal settlements, residents navigate broken sanitation systems and construct housing from salvaged materials. These material fragments not only reflect everyday struggles but also link local experiences to broader global issues concerning infrastructure, informality, and urban living.

- *Newcastle*: An abandoned 1970s elevated walkway serves as a symbol of a 'universalist modernist vision', embodying past ambitions for urban form and planning. While it represents a broader universal ideal, it also tells a deeply local story, imbued with particular meanings and material expressions.

- *Watts, Los Angeles*: In the aftermath of the 1965 Watts Riots, artists collected and exhibited everyday fragments from the destruction. As McFarlane (2021:130) puts it, 'the material fragments of an urban uprising resonated with the larger social struggle that from destruction, something new can be made'. These objects compel viewers to confront issues such as unemployment, police surveillance and violence, racial discrimination, socio-spatial

inequality, and broader forms of injustice. They speak to specific local histories while also contributing to a broader narrative about urban marginalisation and contested space.

These cases collectively exemplify McFarlane's argument that the universal can never be entirely abandoned. It persists in the background, subtly pulled forward through the fragment. The broken house, the damaged toilet, or the unfinished flyover are all specific fragments rooted in place, yet they resonate with a broader universalist vision of urban form. They are not merely localised objects, but evoke shared, universal forms.

UNIVERSALISM VS TRANSVERSALISM: CLAIM AND FORM

> *'There are indeed universalisms at stake in the politics of the city. However, the way in which the universal is reached—the route to it and the form it takes—cannot itself be universal. This highlights the distinction between universalism as a claim or position, and universalism as a form'.*
>
> McFarlane (2025a)

A central distinction in McFarlane's argument lies between universalism as a normative claim and/or as an operational form. He insists on preserving certain universal aspirations, such as the demand for sanitation for all, but critiques the application of universalism as a fixed or standardised model. While the claim may be universal in scope, its enactment, he argues, must be locally grounded and context-specific (Lancione & McFarlane 2021). The pursuit of such goals, therefore, must emerge from and respond to the struggles of a particular place (McFarlane 2019).

Transversalism thus emerges as a critical methodological orientation. Drawing on thinkers like Caldeira (2017), McFarlane argues that particular questions are always already transversal, both because of how the urban is constituted and how learning operates between urban sites, processes, and knowledges. He presents transversalism as essential for sustaining meaningful intellectual and political dialogue across difference, encouraging scholars and practitioners to remain attentive to difference while fostering connections and generating insights across urban sites. Transversalism necessarily exceeds the local, as it entails forging connections across diverse understandings of what the urban is, and how it is lived and theorised.

In conclusion, McFarlane advocates for a more nuanced engagement with universalism—one that does not reject it outright but, as he puts it, is 'particular about how we use it'. Universalism, when approached with a critical awareness of its limits, remains essential to urban politics and the production of urban knowledge (Lancione & McFarlane 2021; McFarlane 2025b). He calls for more contextual application, guided by a transversal approach that is grounded in place yet responsive to shared universal claims.

EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF THE POST-KEYNOTE DIALOGUE

Audience [1]: I was really intrigued by how you talked about different kinds of fragments, some being material, like incomplete infrastructure, and others more cultural, like wall paintings in New York. It made me wonder: what causes these fragments in different places? Are they universal in any way, or do they always depend on local context? For instance, street art exists in many countries, but the meanings vary. In China, for example, murals are often state commissioned to convey specific messages. So how should we define fragments in such cases?

Colin McFarlane [CM]: That is a really important question, and I do explore it in the book, though not fully in this talk. I have become increasingly interested in how material bits and pieces—what I call fragments—can help us understand the urban condition. My interest began with research in informal settlements in Mumbai, looking at how people live with and respond to fragmented infrastructure like toilets, water, and housing. What I found compelling was that people were not just coping; they were organising, learning from global activist networks, and pushing for change. That is where I began to see how fragments tell both local and global stories.

From there, I studied fragments in cities around the world, whether through activism, artistic forms, or historical inequalities. Although these fragments may look different, they often reflect recurring themes: inequality, poverty, and political struggle. But I would not say there is a single cause behind fragmentation. What drives it in Mumbai is not the same as in Berlin, Hong Kong, or London. There are overlapping processes, such as neoliberalism, where the state withdraws from supporting low-income areas and residents are left to build their own systems. But even neoliberalism takes different forms depending on local histories and institutions. In the United States, fragmentation is often linked to racialised state violence. In India, religion and caste play major roles. So, while there are resonances, fragmentation is always shaped by specific cultural, political, and historical contexts.

What I am advocating is an approach that does not simplify this complexity. If we want to understand the global urban condition—and we must, because no city is isolated—we need to think, write, and research in ways that are attentive to both similarity and difference, and that acknowledge our own positions in that process. Some urban theorists have tried to bypass this complexity with universal frameworks. The idea is: cities are diverse, but our theories do not have to be. Such frameworks tend to break down quickly when confronted with the richness of real urban life. Instead, we need a kind of conceptual literacy that allows us to engage with diversity without reducing it.

Finally, the book also reflects on non-material fragments: fragments of knowledge, writing, and artistic practice. Whether in collage, montage, or murals, these forms offer ways of thinking through and expressing the fragmented nature of cities.

Audience [2]: You suggested that justification enables meaningful comparison across urban contexts without collapsing them into sameness. In my research, I am examining how older adults engage with three adjacent but distinct housing types in Shenzhen. Given the differences in governance, rhythms, and affect across these settings, how can we ensure that justification emerges relationally from within the cases, rather than simply emphasising their differences?

CM: The challenge lies in building a meaningful narrative that connects the cases without forcing sameness. There is often a pressure, especially in doctoral work, to quickly 'pin things down', but I would encourage you to resist that urge. As Donna Haraway says: *stay with the trouble*. Take your time with the complexity. Sometimes connections emerge through recurring political claims, shared knowledge, or similar struggles for justice. Sometimes the differences matter more than the similarities, and that is fine. Comparison is not just about finding sameness. It also means recognising differences.

We often assume a general story is more valuable, but recognising and articulating disconnection can be just as insightful. Whether you find strong connections or only limited ones, what matters most is how thoughtfully you relate the particular to the general. At the same time, do not conflate the general with the universal: those are distinct conceptual moves. I have not read your work, so I cannot speak to the specifics, but I hope these reflections are helpful.

Audience [3]: I am doing archival research, so I am curious about how your work connects with history or archives. Materials are more than just physical objects. They carry histories, circulate, and express embedded ideas. I am still trying to figure out how these fit together. In thinking about fragments, I have been exploring spatial metaphors like texture or depth. How might these relate to power or inequality, either historically or topographically?

CM: My work is rooted in contemporary urban conditions, but those are always shaped historically. Take sanitation in Mumbai. It is entangled with colonial legacies. What we now describe as fragmented infrastructure often reflects inherited ideas of what is considered inadequate, shaped by Western frameworks. So yes, fragments are not just spatially relational. They are temporally relational too. What looks fleeting often carries long histories. That is where your metaphor of texture or depth is useful. What appears ephemeral can be deeply layered.

As for archives, I see strong connections. Subaltern studies offer tools for reading against the grain and uncovering voices silenced by dominant narratives. Dipesh Chakrabarty described archival fragments as *lures*, pointing to something we cannot fully recover. Urban fragments act similarly.

But we should not romanticise fragments. It is easy to see them as inherently radical or resistant. I have done that myself. But we must think ethically about how we represent what is partial or marginal, whether in archives or cities.

Urban studies can learn from other disciplines. I have spoken with archaeologists and classicists who also work with fragments. There is potential for interdisciplinary dialogue. So, while I may not have fully addressed your point about texture, I really appreciate the question.

Audience [4]: I am researching water governance in informal settlements in Nairobi. You spoke about the limits of 'the general story' in urban theory. In a similar vein, are we also reaching the limits of using infrastructure as a central analytical lens, especially more than a decade after the rise of critical urbanism and assemblage thinking? How would you assess where urban theory stands today, and where it might be headed?

CM: First, I am not opposed to general stories, but I do think we should be cautious about how we use them. General theories must be able to confront difference, not obscure it. We should not assume they are more valuable than grounded, locally situated accounts.

As for *infrastructure*, I agree that the term has become overstretched. It is used to describe everything from water pipes to social relationships, which risks making it vague. When infrastructure first became central in urban studies, it was exciting. We focused on large systems. Then came more ethnographic, postcolonial work, especially from the Global South, on how people live with infrastructure daily. Now we are seeing new concerns: digital technologies, platforms, robotics. So no, I do not think the concept is exhausted. But we do need more conceptual tools. That is part of why I

am working with *fragments*: not as a replacement, but as a complement that brings out different dimensions of urban life.

Looking ahead, there is great work on land, race, digitality, and property. The decolonial turn has brought critique and new energy to the field. One key question now is whether to keep defining 'the urban', or to use it to ask broader questions about politics, inequality, and justice. Let's not get stuck trying to pin down the urban once and for all. Let's use it to think expansively.

Audience [5]: My research in Cape Town explores how people make their conditions visible in contexts of injustice. I have been reflecting on the 'poo protests', where mobile toilets were used to highlight racialised sanitation inequalities, making absence visible and challenging ideas of 'modern' urban life. I am also looking at how visibility operates politically. Some make themselves visible through encampments, while others choose invisibility to avoid state targeting. In shelters, I have seen how people are fragmented by bureaucratic categories. How can we reconcile these state-driven forms of fragmentation with the more resistant, generative ways people use fragmentation themselves? Can it be both a tool of control and a space for autonomy?

CM: The 'poo protests' in Cape Town are a striking example. For those unfamiliar, activists brought uncollected human waste from informal settlements into public spaces like the airport and legislature to protest poor sanitation. These acts made the invisible hyper-visible, turning waste into a political tool. This speaks to the idea of repurposing the fragment, taking something shaped by marginalisation and turning it into a tool of resistance. It raises two important dynamics. First, the city is a space of fragmentation and control. Urban governance often manages people through systems of housing, welfare, policing, and bureaucracy that sort individuals into categories. Shelters, for example, frequently divide people into 'deserving' and 'undeserving', fragmenting lives into administrative classifications that strip away complexity and reinforce exclusion.

Second, though, the city also exceeds control. The Cape Town protests demonstrate that even in conditions of extreme marginality, there is space for improvisation, unpredictability, and resistance. Yet such acts are never without risk. Using human waste in protest can be alienating, even for allies, as it challenges cultural norms around sanitation, race, and civility. Visibility can be politically powerful, but it can also be dangerous. That is why the politics of visibility is so complex. Some individuals seek to be seen and heard, while others remain intentionally invisible to avoid being targeted. As you noted, visibility is both a strategy and a gamble.

Take the example of Slum Dwellers International, which began in India and expanded globally, including to South Africa. They created detailed documentation of informal settlements—census data, maps, surveys—to make their communities legible to the state and use this data to negotiate improvements. Their first major report, titled *We the Invisible*, was a powerful act of collective visibility. However, at the time, some NGOs were concerned that this would expose communities to surveillance, eviction, or repression. Even data meant to empower can be co-opted or turned against those it seeks to support. This is where fragmentation becomes a useful but tricky concept. Cities do fragment people through governance, infrastructure, and administrative systems. But people also fragment strategically. They refuse total legibility, create opacity, and assert agency in ways that resist capture.

So, to your question: yes, fragmentation can absolutely be both a mechanism of control and a space for resistance, opacity, and autonomy. What makes it so compelling and politically urgent is precisely this tension. Navigating it requires risk, reflection, and creativity. Your work clearly engages with these dynamics, and I would be very interested to see how it evolves.

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