

Interview



# Rethinking the urban-rural dichotomy: An interview with J. Miguel Kanai

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## **Introduction by Yenika Castillo Muñoz**

“The urban” from a global South perspective can mean diverse things, as diverse as the different contexts that the scholars invited to participate in this special issue come from and study in their practices. In this interview, Dr. Juan Miguel Kanai shares with us his own views on “the urban” and connects it with various examples of how it develops from an inherited inequality from colonial and extractive systems. From that perspective, as well as with technological advancements that facilitate exchange of information, and remote services of different kinds, not only has “the urban” expanded its meaning, but also “the rural” has acquired new meanings and has closer connections with global urbanization. In our chat, we also relate to the sustainability turn, which now seeks to turn diverse areas of the city into green sacrifice zones, which, while good in intention, may also cause different social harm. For me, as an interaction designer with a focus on participatory design, who works at the intersection of social diversity, art, and nature community projects, this is an enriching conversation that highlights infrastructure as materializations: invitations or hinders for participatory citizen engagement.

## **Interview transcript (edited)**

**YCM:** What do we mean by “the urban”? What are we studying when we claim to study the urban, and how is it characterized from a global South perspective? Furthermore, how can—and should—we come to know the urban?

**JMK:** The urban is, in my view, a condition that characterizes how most of humanity now lives. It means that when we live in a city or in city-like conditions, this is a sheer condition for people around the world, but under very different circumstances and understood very differently. There are cultural aspects to it in how urban or urbanized lives are conducted and understood. How people understand their habitat, where they live, how they live. What it means when we say that it is an urbanized condition, it means that they live in a certain way that is connected to larger dynamics happening around the world. That is a life that is connected to other places. That is a life that depends on multiple material support systems, different forms of infrastructure, where it is not just purely local consumption that characterizes humanity for centuries, if not millennia. So, it is not just living in cities. It is living in those city-like conditions, in my view. That is why I take a broad view on urbanization and the urban. It doesn't mean that there are no more rural environments or rural understandings, rural cultures, ways of life. It means that even these places and people are now more directly exposed to these urban dynamics. When we talk about the global South's low- and middle-income countries, places that somehow are structurally disadvantaged within the global economic system, the disadvantages also manifest in their urban ways of life, the material supports. There are multiple questions about deficits in terms of infrastructure, the topic I research, but also housing, opportunities, livelihoods. But there are also multiple other resources that people mobilize, and need to mobilize constantly to address those deficits. So, there is all this inventiveness. For example, there is collectivity, ways of addressing these problems, not just as an individual or as a household, but as part of some social aggregation, some collective. Specifically in Latin America, the region of the world that I study and that I

come from, this is quite clear.

It is a sheer condition, but it is also a very specific condition. And I think we need to balance that interconnectedness of the urban and the conditions of possibility for the urban, the constraints, particularly the economic constraints that the capitalist system imposes, but also understand how this is lived and experienced, and how it is understood, and how it is even conceptualized. So, for many years, I studied urbanization in the Brazilian Amazon. When I was doing this, I was also engaging with how Brazilian scholarship engaged with urbanization of the Amazon, not just bringing English-language concepts into this research, using the Amazon as my case study, extracting data, but also engaging with both academic, as well as policy, and popular understandings of what the urban and urbanization mean in this very specific geography of the world.

**YCM: Absolutely. And I think that leads me to the next question, which maybe, I don't know whether to say forgotten, but if maybe less-known urban theorists from the global South and beyond can help us carry out this anti-colonial, anti-capitalist critique when we try to understand this urban condition?**

**JMK:** Yes, fortunately, I think those silences are now being addressed. There is this movement for more than a decade now in Anglo-American scholarship to engage more seriously with urban knowledge from outside Euro-America. There is more material being translated into English, for example, from Portuguese. I was talking about Brazilian scholars, Milton Santos, the until very recently, at least, only awardee of the Vautrin Lud Prize in geography coming from the global South, an Afro-Brazilian man, nonetheless, whose work has been recovered, but quite recently; and his urban work is still perhaps not as translated as his other more general geographical theory and economic development work. So, Milton Santos's work has been quite influential for me in terms of how I think of urbanization in the Amazon within a clear Brazilian system. Bertha Becker, another Brazilian scholar, the one who coined this famous term that the Amazon is an *urbanized forest*, another one. Roberto Monte-Mór, who is still based, but retired, from Federal University of Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte, third-largest city. So, three very important thinkers about urbanization dynamics in the Amazon, writing both in Portuguese and other languages, but largely for their Brazilian audience. And, until recently, with not so much reception in the English-speaking world. There are journals now that fund some translation of urban works. I think that is one way of remedying these silences and those forgotten scholars. There should be more.

**YCM: In your work, you also explore this concept of *global urbanization*, but you are very careful to frame this as embedded in systems of oppression, or systems of global inequalities. How does this global urbanization materialize differently in global North areas and in global South areas? Even understanding that in some middle-income countries, like the ones that you research, there can be inequalities that also make that you have almost global North standards and very poor standards in certain regions?**

**JMK:** There is no one type of global North city. If you think about cities in here, in Northern Europe, they're very different from cities in southern Europe, let alone different from those in the United States. The same for cities in the global South, low- and middle-

income countries, there is much variation. And I think we need to be very careful about over-generalization. If you think about city size, and this notion of the *mega-city*, which has become very popular, and about mega-cities being characteristic of the global South, the largest urban agglomeration in the world, in my view, and according to some data, some people may not agree, is Tokyo, Japan, an urban agglomeration with 50 million people. Japan is one of the world's largest economies, with one of the highest GDPs per capita and one of the highest levels of human development. Very high life expectancy, very high access to advanced consumption. So, this is a huge city. Should we call it a mega-city, the way mega-cities are understood? I'm not sure, right? It is a mega-region with very high levels of both economic and human development.

**YCM: You also research a lot of infrastructure. I wanted to ask you, what do the rural and the peripheral mean when now we have all this technological development and a lot of urban initiatives that are also redefining what the rural and the peripheral is, right? Can you share a little bit with us your views on that?**

**JMK:** Absolutely, the rural still exists. As I said earlier in my talk, it is not that we live on a city planet now. The world is urbanized with lots of morphological differences. Many places around the world now feel the impact of cities more clearly, even if they are still largely rural in their conditions, their physical development, their cultures, and also how people live their lives. There is a field in Latin American Studies I'm familiar with, but also in other regions of the world, that is called New Ruralities. I've read quite a bit of this field of New Ruralities when I was doing my research on extensive urbanization in the Amazon. I've used some of it also in my work in remote areas, conflict-affected areas of Colombia. And I like the nuance of this field. Talk about a New Rurality, understanding that the rural is a condition that has shifted, and you know it means it has a very different meaning now, in a largely urbanized world, than it had even a few decades ago. Rural-urban linkages, rural-urban effects, are much stronger and much clearer.

**YCM: You talked about these cleaner zones and initiatives that can be a new form of sacrifice zones in this podcast about the UK and China, but I could connect it with Latin America, where I am also from, where there is a lot of industrial and economic sacrifice zones that have had a big impact on the environment, society, and people displaced. You also talk about and investigate de-industrialization. So, I wonder how these sacrifice zones, both the ones that we knew from before, that are so destructive, but also these new green initiatives, what are their implications in this new urban development?**

**JMK:** I talked about sacrifice zones in the Urban Radar podcast of the University of Sheffield, and what I referred to in that podcast is how changes in large-scale urbanization and large-scale urbanization as a mode of development are impacting the planetary environment. The meaning of sacrifice zones is now also broader, it is no longer places where factories' pollutants were concentrated, and they were sacrificed to industrial development. We now have green sacrifice zones we can talk about. Zones that are being sacrificed to the goal of sustainability, places not just in protected, remote forest areas, but places in peri-urban, even urban locations that are dedicated, re-zoned, purposely adapted for sustainability purposes that have very pernicious social

consequences in terms of exclusions, removals of people, imposing very uneven costs on different people, and sometimes a very large burden on already disadvantaged communities. It is no longer just the remote, exclusionary conservation zone, what scholars have called *fortress conservation*. It is now these special purpose sustainability zones amidst urban regions, largely urbanized regions, that are imposing these large burdens on various populations. I'm not against special purpose zones for sustainability, but I think their management, their designation, needs to be more democratically decided.

**YCM: You have been working also with educational and cultural spaces as places where more people can get engaged and have more of a say in urban development, hopefully in more democratic and open ways. Where do you think future developments are moving towards in global South urbanisms, or at least in the contexts you specialize in?**

**JMK:** My current project is working with participatory development of community-scale green infrastructure. I work with an interdisciplinary team in Buenos Aires, Argentina, we are focusing on schools. Buenos Aires is a city with relatively very little green space, very limited amounts of green space per person for a city of 3 million residents and 6 million data users. Schools in the city, they are very variegated, but many of them are very gray areas. Their schoolyards are literally dead in the sense that there is no vegetation, no biotic elements in them, and we have identified them as a site of opportunity to green the city. Vegetation at school can solve multiple purposes, contribute to the local community in different ways, not just by, for example, protecting children playing outdoors from air pollutants, but also regulating temperatures, particularly during heat waves or in summer or even spring months, when the temperatures are very high now, but also allowing children to understand nature, in nature. For city children to have much more of what is called nature-based education. Nature-based play contributes to questions of mental health, reducing stress, also for the teachers and school community in general. So, these are forms of infrastructure that serve multiple purposes. They are low-cost, and it is very important that we understand that green infrastructure is not a luxury. It is not just a fashion from the global North that some people like me are trying to introduce in the global South. There are multiple other priorities. No. Green infrastructure is one of the components of cities that are going to be resilient and adaptable to the climate emergency. Their cost is very low in comparison to other forms of infrastructure, and they are not alternatives. They are key enhancers of infrastructure development. It is not building a green fence or building a school building. It is not building a house or adding green components. The cost of enhancing these facilities with vegetation is marginal. It is more of a political decision, and it is an aspect of social awareness.

**YCM: Lastly, I would like to ask you a question that we have been inviting our guests to share with us, maybe more personal: What is an element from global South urbanisms or urban contexts that you like the most, maybe identifies you in some way, or you find most enriching to learn about?**

**JMK:** I think there is much that Latin American urbanisms can offer to the world, particularly in terms of changing things, questioning how authoritarian forms of urbanization operate, bringing and producing alternatives from popular movements,

popular forms of knowledge, introducing forms of real democratic participation. There is much to learn from how the urban is produced, managed, lived, and studied in Latin America.

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interview](#)

## Authors



### **Juan Miguel Kanai**

Miguel Kanai is an urban geographer whose works focuses on large-scale urbanisation processes and the role that infrastructure provision plays in shaping urban and peri-urban environments. A Senior Lecturer at the University of Sheffield, School of Geography and Planning, Miguel obtained his PhD in urban planning from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) he has taught and researched in multiple countries in Latin America, the USA, Europe and Asia.

He has published widely in English and Spanish and received multiple awards for his research and impact work, including twice the Ashby Prize from the Environment and Planning journal. His current research agenda focuses on alternatives to infrastructure-led development, participatory approaches to community scale green infrastructure, and the politics of special purpose sustainability zones.



### **Yénika Castillo Muñoz**

Yénika Castillo Muñoz is a multidisciplinary designer with a background in industrial and interaction design. She has taught several interaction design courses at the School of Arts and Communication at Malmö University. In her professional practice, she explores methods for participatory design that facilitate democracy and co-creation in projects that approach social and environmental sustainability. Her main interest is to understand the implications of design, craft, and creation to materialize diverse views and ways of being in the world from migrant, decolonial, and pluriversal perspectives. She is a co-founder of the Nordic Network of Global South Urbanisms (NEGSU) at Malmö University.