



Urban land and landscapes: Thinking urban matters relationally

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Together, the texts gathered for this theme issue should help to shed light on what it means to ponder urban matters as a question that concerns cities' material landscapes, who owns and shapes these landscapes, and how cities are shaped by socio-ecological processes that simultaneously shape land far beyond cities' administrative boundaries.

A useful political-economic entry point for pondering this is found in centring on urban land as an asset owned and controlled by particular actors. Urban matters are thus approached in relation to arguably *the* most central question for grasping power and possibilities in a capitalist political economy: property.

In a book centred on the UK but topical far beyond that national context, Geographer Brett Christophers has recently traced how land owners since the 1970s have returned "to their own historic position of economic and social power" on the back of a broader rentierization of the economy, wherein which "profits have increasingly taken the form of economic rents" (Christophers, 2020: 5-6). As he shows, gross value added through land rent has, since the beginning of the 1990s, been a primary source of UK economic 'growth' (p.333-334, with growth in his account fittingly put in scare quotes). Moreover, land rent is "in the UK ... a predominantly urban affair" (Christophers, 2020: 331). Reaching its zenith in the capital, London land was, by the UK government's estimate, valued at £29,1m per hectare, a thousand times the average value of a hectare of agricultural land (Christophers, 2020: 352).

In the book that these examples and figures come from, *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy, and Who Pays for It*, Christophers's prime concern is rentierism's effects on UK economic inequality. But to grasp the full extent of how and why land ownership matters in an urban context, that book should ideally be placed alongside one that he wrote two years earlier, *The New Enclosure: The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain* (Christophers, 2019). Together, these two illuminate how the problem is not *only* that rentierization drives income inequality. Equally important are the political effects arising when public authorities shed their land. Property is always of crucial importance, both to owners and non-owners. While the privatization of public land has not gained the same attention as more spectacular cases of privatization, Christophers contends that it nonetheless has obvious political implications. "If the government disposes of public land, it disposes of the public power associated with it. There surely cannot be many government decisions that matter more in a democratic society" (Christophers 2018: 5).

Shifting to Sweden, the country that several of the texts in this theme issue are concerned with, public power in urban planning was indeed, for much of the 20th century, premised on extensive municipal land ownership. Primarily discussing Stockholm, Rolf Blücher has traced how the city during the first four decades of the 20th century bought some 9,700ha of rural land, beginning with Brännkyrka to the south and Bromma in the north in 1904. Thus, municipally owned land surrounding Sweden's capital became the basis for subsequent subway-centred suburban expansions (Blücher, 2006: 135). But as Blücher (2006) continues, shifts in Swedish planning legislation and an increased political belief in the market has since meant that Swedish municipalities have instead begun to sell land to boost municipal economies.

How Swedish municipalities historically have made, and today make, use of their land-holdings was at the centre of Geographer Hanna Zetterlund's (2022) dissertation *The Landed Municipality*. Focusing on three municipalities (Stockholm, Örebro and Uppsala), and drawing on Doreen Massey and Alejandrina Catalano's (1978) work on ownership rationales for private land, she therein centred on municipal ownership modalities. In doing so, she sought to uncover three different land ownership rationales, "a moral rationale characterized by an ethic of long-term responsibility; a productive rationale characterized by an orientation towards achievement of practical social goals; and an investment rationale characterized by prioritization of asset value" (Zetterlund, 2022). In this theme issue, readers are offered an introduction to her dissertation, situating it in relation to the research debates on property that she is concerned with. Property ownership and how the municipality can simultaneously be a very powerful actor *and* refrain from engaging in negotiations with private property owners is also touched upon in Miriam Negash's text. In this text, she focuses on what can be learned from a failed attempt at municipal-sanctioned artistic intervention into debates on redevelopments and densification of urban land in Rosengård.

Thinking of urban land and landscapes from an urban *political-ecological* perspective ushers in a slightly different (though by no means incompatible) view of what the economy is compared to the focus of most urban political *economy*. Crucial questions not only concern property ownership, land rent, or indeed the myriad of urban political-economic questions not touched upon in this introduction. They also concern how urban environments concretely shape and are shaped by the economy as "a powerful, pulsing engine for mobilizing and transforming materials" (Bridge, 2009: 1222).

Urbanization is a socio-ecological process that continuously proceeds through "the settlement of new land at the urban edge" (Keil, 2018: 27), something which is accounted for within this theme issue in Alva Zalar's piece on the development of the Hyllie neighbourhood established on erstwhile farmland south of Malmö. Therefore, thinking about urban land and landscapes necessitates moving beyond what Hillary Angelo and David Wachsmuth in a critical intervention almost a decade ago called 'methodological cityism,' or "an analytical privileging, isolation and perhaps naturalization of the city in studies of urban processes where the non-city may also be significant" (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015: 19). This critique, in turn, led them to question just which phenomena are considered urban matters. Is "strip mining in the Appalachian mountains any less a case of urban environmental injustice than polluted rivers from sewage treatment plants in the Bronx"? Urban matters can be and are, in other words, found in sites that, to many, might feel distinctively non-urban.

As Kaika (2004:25) underscores, "excavating the flows that constitute the urban would produce a political-ecology of the urbanization of nature." Excavating flows and uncovering urban metabolisms have indeed, for close to three decades, been a key feature of urban political ecology. Belgian geographer Erik Swyngedouw has, in an example worth citing at length, introduced the city as a socio-ecological relation through asking readers to imagine themselves standing in central London:

“Imagine standing on Piccadilly Circus in London and considering the socio-environmental metabolic relations that come together in this global-local place. Smells, tastes, things, and bodies from all nooks and crannies of the world are floating by, consumed, displayed, narrated, visualized and transformed. The Amazon Forest Shop and Restaurant plays to the tune of eco-sensitive shopping and the multi-billion pound eco-industry while competing with McDonalds’ burgers and Dunkin’ Donuts. The sounds of world music vibrate from Virgin’s Megastore, while people, spices, clothes, foodstuffs and materials from all over the planet whirl by. The neon lights are fed by nuclear processes, coal or gas burning in far-off power plants, while passing cars consume fuels from oil-deposits and pump CO₂ into the air, affecting forests, climates and people around the globe. These disparate processes trace the global geographic mappings that flow through the urban and ‘produce’ cities as palimpsests of densely layered bodily, local, national and global—but geographically depressingly uneven— socio-ecological and technonatural processes.” (Swyngedouw, 2006:105)

Imagining oneself as engulfed within such global flows might be easy when standing in the symbolically loaded centre of a ‘world city’ (Massey, 2007). Piccadilly Circus is on par with Shibuya Scramble Crossing in Tokyo or New York’s Times Square as symbols for their respective cities, or indeed for Global North metropolitan life *per se*. But urban metabolism, to be clear, is neither a cosmopolitan phenomenon nor a city-centre one. One could imagine standing in Crawley, Joensuu, or Oruro and encounter not the *same* global processes, but nonetheless, trace how these conurbations are also made and remade through their connections to the rest of the world. Urban matters are then traced as a relational affair, or a process through which both urban and rural spaces are co-constituted. In this theme issue, such explorations form the foundation for an interview with sociologist Hillary Angelo, focusing on her work on conceptualizing and problematizing both the urban and urban sustainability.

Much influential urban political ecology has focused on the fundamental role of water in enabling modern urban lives. Matthew Gandy’s seminal account of New York City, for example, traced how this city relied on the construction of an ‘invisible city’ of pipes and aqueducts stretching some 250 kilometres north through New York State to the Catskill/Delaware Watershed. Thus, the “hydrological cycle of a whole region has been harnessed to provide water for a city: the rain dripping down through the leaves of hemlock trees will eventually find its way into the pipes and taps of millions of homes” (Gandy, 2002:23). Tracing such flows can tell us important things about the power at work in the production of urban landscapes (Kaika, 2004). While people in New York City might have celebrated aqueducts, they were certainly not a self-evident triumph for all or merely a technological accomplishment. Taking her starting point with the upstate watershed communities rather than the city, April M. Beisaw (2023:11) rather argues that a “parasitic relation develops between those who want water and those who have it.” The provision of urban water, in short, is inescapably a deeply political question. The water becomes self-evidently somebody’s, at the expense of somebody else’s claims to and use of this resource. The same holds for *all* those flows sustaining urban landscapes, whether that’s concrete (Chopin, 2023, Watts, 2019) or electricity (Angelo, 2023; Knuth et al., 2022).

Questions concerning to whom resources ‘belong’ are omnipresent when flows are traced.

Moreover, tracing the flows that make urban landscapes requires following them where they take you, both above and below ground. In his work on San Francisco, Gray Brechin described financial districts as “inverted minescapes” (Brechin, 2006: 66). Fortunes made deep down in the mines around a city, itself the result of a mid-19th century gold rush, were amassed in bank vaults and invested in the built environment, with steel dug up from underground transformed into i-beams, bolts, and numerous other construction parts. Meanwhile, steel-frame skyscrapers used “much the same technology for vertical transportation, communication and life support as did the Comstock mines” (Brechin, 2006: 69). To the focus on city and countryside as co-produced material landscapes, this last example adds a focus on the relation between surface and subterranean processes. True, this was already evident in urban political ecology’s focus on ‘invisible’ cities of pipes and aqueducts, but is now pushed further to the forefront. Underlining the fundamental role of the underground is also at the heart of the research currently conducted by the UNDER team, who are introducing their work on this theme issue, which is centered on conceptualizing the role of what they call geosystem services in spatial planning. Together, the five texts can, of course, only scratch at the surface of a number of interrelated political and conceptual themes concerning how urban land and landscapes can be both understood and addressed. But hopefully, they offer fruitful ways for those interested in thinking about cities as socio-ecological relations, and as a particular kind of land cover.

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