

Reviews



Books

General

Tim Bunnell and Daniel P. S. Goh, *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present*

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The volume *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present*, edited by geographer Tim Bunnell and sociologist Daniel Goh, brings together twenty-four essays by scholars and activists who were affiliated with or interacted around the project “Urban Aspirations in Asia” led by Bunnell at the National University of Singapore. Bunnell states in his introductory essay, and thereby setting the tone for the volume, that “in both academic and popular imaginations, the future is not where it used to be” (9). For one thing, he argues, it is no longer imagined as situated somewhere in a Western metropolis but rather increasingly somewhere in Asia. For another, the future may not only lie in the future, as it were.

The collection of individual essays is framed by a preface by the editors, an introduction by Bunnell, and a conclusion by Goh. The essays are grouped into seven thematic sections, entitled “Futures Past,” “Pastness for the Future,” “Infrastructures of Future-Making,” “Relocating Futurity,” “Whose Futurity?,” “Doing Urban Futures,” and “Asia in New Geographies of Theory.” In his introduction, Bunnell introduces some of the key themes that run through the volume, such as engagements with Arjun Appadurai’s idea of the “capacity to aspire,” as well as the debate over the (arguably misplaced) dichotomy between urban and rural. He concludes his introductory essay by giving an overview of the thematic integration of the individual chapters to come.

The two first sections engage the urban mostly in imaginary realms. The section entitled “Futures Past” brings together essays by André Sorensen (on Tokyo), Christina Schwenkel (on Vinh, Vietnam), and Pen Sereypagna (on Phnom Penh). These essays center on examples of historical imaginings of urban futurity (historical plans), visions, and utopian projects in these cities and discuss their significance for the present. The second section, entitled “Pastness for the Future,” assembles discussions of the different ways in which the past is invoked by city-dwellers in an endeavor of imagining alternative futures. Examples range from nostalgic memories of the past in

Dhaka (discussed by Tabassum Zaman), to citizen activism concerning the colonial built heritage in Hong Kong (discussed by Cecilia Chu), as well as some city-dwellers' yearnings for connecting back to a rural life outside of Ho Chi Minh City (as discussed by Jamie Gillen).

The third section, "Infrastructures of Future-Making," contains four chapters. Nausheen H. Anwar discusses complications in the planning and construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Border, which forms part of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative. The two following essays problematize the construction and maintenance of sanitation infrastructures. While D. Asher Ghertner shows how sewage cleaning mainly by Dalits in Delhi contributes to cementing Hindu dominance, Indrawan Prabaharyaka discusses problems and opportunities surrounding the lack of a universal sewerage system in Jakarta, in that this phenomenon gives rise to improvised ways of maintenance, of caring, and of experimenting with alternative futures. Finally, Eli Elinoff reflects on the speedy temporality of capitalist hope and the ambivalent sentiments of slowness and dissatisfaction with the way things develop in the cities of Bangkok and Khon Kaen in Thailand.

Sections four and five bring together essays that more centrally deal with people and their perceived agency in different metropolises. The chapters assembled in "Relocating Futures" first bring us to urban China, where Elaine Ho portrays the hopes and disappointments that African migrants experience there. John Taylor reflects on the city-making experiences of participants in Urban Social Forum meetings in Indonesia. Singaporean planning schemes and their local appropriations are featured in the two following chapters. While Zane Kripe describes the discrepancy between the state's aspirations for technopreneurship in a specifically designated area of Singapore and the way this was lived in practice, Carol Upadhyia presents a critical reading of plans surrounding the construction of the new Indian provincial capital Amaravati, to be built with the help of Singaporean expertise.

Section five, "Whose Futurity?," assembles four essays that treat questions of ownership, inequity, and the (im)possibility of aspiring for a better future. Rebecca Bowes, in her essay, focuses on women's everyday struggles for survival in and around the volatile construction business in Bengaluru, India. Michelle Ann Miller describes the way different actors experienced relocation in the aftermath of the eruption of Mount Merapi in Indonesia, where in many cases mere exhaustion precluded aspiration. Rita Padawangi traces the struggles against and eventual eviction of inhabitants of the Bukit Duri neighborhood of Jakarta. Finally, Julian C. H. Lee and his three co-authors juxtapose Malaysian hegemonic Malay "skyscraper-futurity" with alternative visions of the city.

Section six, entitled "Doing Futures," brings together three essays that share a concern for urban experimentation and the constant making of futures. Mike Douglass charts the contours of a progressive city that would lead to what he calls "human flourishing." He illustrates this with reference to Seoul and the benefits of increased citizen participation. Mary Ann O'Donnell critically reflects on the global city orientation of Shenzhen and puts this in relation to earlier, different city development plans. In the third essay, Vineeta Sinha describes the challenges she faces as an ethnographer of Hindu religious practices in Singapore, where religious sites may be relocated at any time.

The last section is more strongly theoretical in orientation. Its title, "Asia in New Geographies of Theory," refers to Ananya Roy's advocacy for theory that is attentive

to the global south rather than taking Europe and Northern America as the standard for theorization. The authors, in different ways, take up the questions of “planetary urbanization” and agency, namely the “capacity to aspire,” which many of the preceding authors had directly or indirectly also spoken to. Peter van der Veer compares urban religious practices in different metropolises in Asia and concludes that these often extend far beyond the immediate urban environment into the rural hinterland as well as to transnational contexts. Trevor Hogan sketches diachronic urban developments as well as the more synchronic developments taking place in different locales, often with reference to each other, and formulates his view of an Asian hyper-urbanization. Finally, Gavin Smith, revisits his own earlier work on extra-city urbanization. He concludes that his arguments are still valid. While he maintains that crude exaggerations of a dichotomy between city and countryside—rural versus urban Asia—do not hold, he warns against discarding evidence that suggests that in terms of mortality, poverty, and education there still remain stark contrasts between the two ends of this continuum.

Daniel P. S. Goh, in his concluding essay, reflects on the role of agency in the contexts portrayed in the chapters. Agency, he bemoans, is often associated with either bottom-up or top-down practices and consciousness. He points to practices of “side-ways agency” that do not neatly follow a ready categorization according to power and resistance.

Overall, the number and diversity of texts assembled in the volume are astounding—being rooted in disciplines ranging from architecture, anthropology, sociology, geography, urban planning, and political science to demography and reflections on political activism. This provides a broad scope but is still attentive to the nuances that different contexts and constellations afford. Moreover, the collection brings together a variety of perspectives on urban futurity. Futurity here is not reduced to an arrow pointing to a distant point ahead, but rather the authors engage with different temporal orientations that include, among others, memories of imaginations and invocations of the past applied to aspirations for the future. Whether the book stands up to the test of not treating Western theory as the standard to refer to—as the final section suggests—may be debated. What contributors throughout the book do is either theorize based on thorough empirical research on the ground in Asia or reflect on their long-term experience of having lived and/or worked in Asian cities.

The book dispenses with jargon and is written in a highly accessible style throughout. With both breadth and depth of scope, it will surely appeal to a broad audience of scholars and practitioners of Asian urbanisms, as well as of urban developments across the globe.

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