

Cityness

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The vast urban agglomerations taking shape across the world are often seen as lacking the features, quality, and sense of what we think of as urbanity. Yet, urbanity is perhaps too charged a term – charged with a Western sense of cosmopolitanism and of what public space is or should be. In fact, it may be part of our current history-in-the-making that we have yet to find a term that triggers a new interpretation of urbanity. The term cityness suggests the possibility that there are kinds of urbanity that do not fit into the definition developed in the West. So cityness, in a way, could be described as an instrument to capture something that otherwise might easily get lost: types of urbanity that are *non-Western* or that are novel and depart from traditional notions in the West. We need to open up the discussion to a far broader range of urbanities. In my work on global cities, I confront a parallel problematic in dealing with globality. It is often assumed that globality entails cosmopolitanism. However, I posit that there are also non-cosmopolitan forms

of the global and, further, that these also need to be distinguished from familiar vernacular cosmopolitanisms.¹

The architect Ma Qingyun argues that the Chinese city does not need public space – instead, it *makes* public spaces: when, for example, at night, a bus shelter in Shanghai becomes a public space when people set up tables to play cards. The notion of public space as developed in a Western European context will be of little help in reading key aspects of urbanity in Shanghai, or perhaps even Mexico City. Ergo, our concept of urbanity must be stripped of its currently overcharged meanings. In the process, I have identified a couple of categories that allow us to understand something about alternative kinds of urbanity. In traditionally defined urbanity, multiple elements come together in the context of an urban aggregate and produce something that is more than the sum of its individual parts. The urban agglomerations that proliferate across the world today – vast expanses of urban built space – seem to produce a formula, whereby the whole is *not* more than the sum of its parts. If these urban aggregates actually contain urbanities, it would be an obstacle to a unified notion of urbanity derived from the European experience. It would indicate that we need to open up the meaning of urbanity to a wider range of empirical instances.

¹ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991.) Id., *Global Networks, Linked Cities* (New York: Routledge 2002). Id., ; *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publication 2006).

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Cityness is a concept that encompasses innumerable types of urbanity, including, indeed, an intersection of differences that actually produces something new; whether good or bad, this intersection is consequential. A very practical and subjective example comes from London, a city inhabited by many different types of Muslim groups; the notion of *Muslim woman* is actually multifaceted: Muslim women from Bangladesh intersect with Muslim women from Turkey, from India, from Pakistan, from Africa or the Middle East. Something happens in this intersection of differences even within what we might think of as a very narrowly defined group. Cityness must accommodate these intersections which constitute a form of subjectivity and perhaps untranslatable into an immediate tangible outcome. Cities contain a multitude of such examples.

Another more practical example can be found in Midtown Manhattan. Midtown Manhattan architecture sends out signals of neutrality, precision, engineering. But if you are actually there at lunchtime, the visual experience is conjoined by the experience of the smell of grilled meat coming from immigrant vendors. A juxtaposition of two different conditions is taking place – but not necessarily of two autonomous worlds, each existing on its own terms. The people who are eating at those vendors at noon are not only the tourists and the secretaries but also the professionals who may not have time for a power lunch every

workday. They inhabit a high-speed work space, and there will be days when grabbing a sausage from the vendor on the street is the most efficient use of time. Here we have, then, the junction of two high-speed velocities even though each is produced in enormously diverse settings. The intersection of two such different worlds which produces a third space is an instance of cityness, though it doesn't necessarily register on the conceptual radar of what we define as urbanity. We could multiply these examples endlessly but what matters here is the notion of intersection and its capacity to make a novel condition.

These examples point to an order, albeit not that which corresponds to the formal logic of planners. These juxtapositions may be following a fuzzy logic that enables a type of *making* not containable in the spaces of the formal plan. In this juxtaposition, making cityness becomes possible.² Public space, not as a representation of what it ought to be, but public space as the activity of making it such, is one key vector into cityness. An important distinction must be made between public space and a space with public access; the latter is not by itself or as a design, a space for poesis. The publicness of that space needs to be made – through the practices and the usages of people. This also means that public spaces can seem chaotic. If there is, in fact, some order underlying chaotic-looking spaces, it is a nebulous order; this way of looking at such chaos opens up to the

² The Greek verb *poiein* translates as “making” or “creating.”