

## **Cityness and its gaps and pauses**

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The 'cityness' of cities is, according to urbanist and sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone, the latency that results from how urban life places differences of all kinds in relation to one another.<sup>1</sup> This thrown-togetherness has the potential to unleash a myriad of unforeseeable 'capabilities and experiences' in such a way that can expand our collective and individual fields of view on what is conceivable and imaginable.<sup>2</sup> Many urban dwellers project their hopes and dreams onto cities. In doing so, they invest in and contribute to the production of urban life. Cities encompass multiple temporalities and spatialities: any given city is simultaneously a myriad of cities. Cities are entangled with places elsewhere. Simone articulates this, saying that 'to live in one city today means living in many, as any individual city folds in and stretches itself across urban experiences, information, and economies throughout the world'.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, it is increasingly financial interconnections that seem to be gaining the upper hand in dictating how cities take shape and function, and how urban lives are lived. The reshaping of urban space is a profit-making process in the context of an increasingly globalized world. Financial capital, with no attachments to any specific place, flows through cities, transforming them in a manner that does not respond to local context. The flows of financial capital extend well beyond cities; they cast a wide net around various ways of life, a range of processes and places far flung and remote, and yet draw them into the web of urban life. Is there any part of our world now that is not urbanized in this sense?

The responsiveness of cities to the movement of capital affects the range of possible expressions of cityness. The city of hopes and dreams can be parasitically used by elites as a city of profit. Rather than expanding through multiplications of the creative possibilities of differences:

'...cities become mechanisms that attempt to make these differences serve the interests of narrowly drawn notions of what is valuable and what is possible.... In

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<sup>1</sup> Simone, AbdouMaliq, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*, New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. xiii.

other words, instead of intersecting histories, ways of doing things, and aspirations of residents into a particular way of dealing with the larger world, cities have become conduits for feeding resources, ideas, and labour to the growth and movement of capital.<sup>4</sup>

The exhibition *Urban Aspirations* posits some relations between slow and fast changing cities, and between the lives of city dwellers at work, rest and at play, here and elsewhere.

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### *The gaps*

The construction sites of cities are the gaps and interruptions that embody the restless becoming of cities. In some cities, the prominence of such gaps is a reminder of the way that cities are perpetually being reconfigured; in others, they bring to mind sluggish or halted redevelopment. *Urban Aspirations* provocatively references urban transformations that are catapulting ahead at breakneck speed or, alternatively, excruciatingly stalled. What's happening in the gaps of cities in states of emergency and post-emergency? Financial capital may play a role in either hastening or slowing down redevelopment.

Interrupted and hyperactive urban redevelopments lack transparency – a blocked view, or opacity, is captured by Lim Sokchanlina's *Urban Street Night Club* (2013). This work uses a mock construction barricade as the video projection screen, echoing the video itself that features a construction barricade in Phnom Penh: a blank sheet of metal used to mask the view from the street of the construction taking place behind its protective layer. This construction barrier's smooth surface features symbolic imagery that represents a particular form of national imaginary and is intended to somehow be linked to urban development projects. The pedestrian is to assume that the work underway will shift Phnom Penh towards a vision of a certain kind of city—but whose vision? The perpetual reconstruction of urban space—the constant quest to attract global investment in urban land development, but also the quest to liberate property investments lost in insurance markets—these are the forces that narrow the points of view that are reflected in the city.

### *The pauses*

The pauses, the tea breaks and the nights out for workers in the city reflect corporate cultures and the changing nature of work in the city. Or is it changing?

Associated with the move to make cities command-and-control centres for the profitable movement of capital, is the shift away from manufacturing toward service sector

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

economies. This results in some cities—those deemed already, or seeking to become recognised—as being qualified by this narrow definition of ‘global’. Such cities see an expansion of work for certain kinds of professionals: financial, insurance, banking and real estate industries. But as sociologist Saskia Sassen points out, the global city—as a hub of high-end service sector economies—also requires an army of low paid labour to take care of their domestic needs.<sup>5</sup> All the cleaning, cooking, child care, elderly care, nannies, cooks, cleaners, someone to walk the dog, masseuse, manicurist (the list is endless); an army of workers to service the still human needs of the high-end service sector elite. These are not new forms of work. This undervalued underbelly of the global city is continuous with what came before: the undervaluation of care and domestic work, often done by women, often done for no or low pay. What has changed is that this form of work is increasingly commodified.

In Singapore, a global city aspiring to be a gateway to Asia and a centre for the financial industry, the city appears oriented toward a corporate culture. It is a city continually redeveloping itself to best cater to the needs, demands and desires of its international corporate professionals—attracting them with an escapist, distracting, expensive night out filled with cheap thrills as addressed in *Slash-and-Burn Interlaced with Youthful Volatility* (2016) by Enzo Camacho and Amy Lien.

The hyper-visibility of some workers is at the expense of those at the bottom of the heap, meaning that at the same time that increasingly unequal cities cater for the play of some, the very right to a break from work for others remains precarious. For Public Share, in *Conditions Subsequent* (2016), the worker’s right to quietude and rest is celebrated and staunchly defended from the encroachment of neoliberal demands for constant service through an ode to the mundane tea break.

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<sup>5</sup> Sassen, Saskia, *The Global City*, New York, London, Tokyo, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.