



Introducing the Urban Theory Lab

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Contemporary urban research stands at a crossroads. As scholars struggle to decipher current forms of urbanization, they are forced to confront the limitations of inherited approaches to urban questions, to face the difficult challenge of inventing new theories, concepts and methods that are better equipped to illuminate emergent spatial conditions, their contradictions and their implications at diverse sites and scales around the world. The result of these efforts is an intellectual field in disarray.

Perhaps more so than ever before since the consolidation of radical approaches to urban theory in the 1970s, there is today fundamental disagreement regarding the basic dimensions of what Manuel Castells famously referred to as “the urban question”—its constitutive elements, its empirical expressions and its political implications.¹ There are deep questions of theorization, conceptualization,

interpretation and method that remain chronically unresolved across many realms of urban knowledge and action.²

Today, self-described urbanists appear to have only one thing in common—the desire to investigate, understand and reshape “urban” spaces, however the latter may be demarcated in analytic, political or strategic terms. Early twenty-first century urbanists are likely to disagree on nearly everything else—the conceptualization of *what* they are trying to study or transform, the justification for *why* they are doing so, and the elaboration of *how* best to pursue this goal.

The Urban Theory Lab-GSD (UTL-GSD) has been established to grapple with this state of affairs. Through a combination

¹ Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977 [1972].

² Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000; Ananya Roy, “The 21st century metropolis: new geographies of theory,” *Regional Studies*, 43, 6, 2009, 819-830.

of research and pedagogy, our aim is to mobilize the resources of theory to help advance the collective project of understanding and shaping the contemporary urbanization process.

A lab for *theory*? The starting point of the UTL is the strong contention that *theory matters*.

While most labs are oriented towards empirical forms of experimentation, the UTL's agenda is to *proceed experimentally* with theories, concepts and methods. Of course, such an endeavor requires deep, wide-ranging engagement with concrete, contextually grounded research on all manner of urban phenomena—economic, regulatory, cultural, architectural, experiential, political. But the primary goal of this theoretico-experimental endeavor is, as French regulation theorist Michel Aglietta once proposed in a powerful critique of

empiricist economics, “the development of concepts and not the ‘verification’ of a finished theory.”³

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks shape perceptions of the urban landscape, interpretations of the built environment and practices of urban intervention. Such frameworks have a massively structuring impact on concrete urban investigations, because they condition “how we ‘carve up’ our object of study and what properties we take particular objects to have.”⁴

In this sense, questions of theory and concept formation lie at the heart of all forms of urban research and practice, even the most empirical, locally embedded and detail-oriented. They are not

³ Michael Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*. London: Verso, 1979, p. 66.

⁴ Andrew Sayer, “Defining the urban,” *GeoJournal*, 9, 3, 1984, p. 281; see also Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science*. 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, 1992.

mere background conditions or framing devices, but constitute the very interpretive fabric through which urbanists weave together metanarratives, normative-political orientations, analyses of empirical data and strategies of intervention.

Perhaps, then, it is through the *work of theory* that we can begin to clarify the sites, scales, morphologies and trajectories of contemporary urbanization processes, as well as the social forces, institutional arrangements, political strategies, spatial ideologies and power relations through which the latter are produced. In the context of the UTL, this work is understood as an ongoing, reflexive, practico-analytic exercise in demarcating the what, the why and the how of historical and emergent urbanizing formations across places, territories and scales.

If the aspiration towards a generalized clarification of such matters should prove elusive, a well-tempered but critical approach to urban theory may still seek to accomplish a more modest but essential task: that of illuminating the wide-ranging implications, whether methodological, empirical or political, of particular theoretical choices at various levels of abstraction—from concept, norm, representation, model and map to scheme, plan, strategy, intervention and projection.⁵

The UTL seeks to promote experimental theoretical forays into emergent urban conditions and urbanization processes around the world. Such high-risk, speculative endeavors may lead into blind

⁵ Examples of the latter sort of exercise include: Andrew Sayer, "Postfordism in question," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 13, 3, 1989, 666-695; Jamie Peck, "Struggling with the creative class," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29, 4, 2005, 740-770; Neil Brenner, David Madden and David Wachsmuth, "Assemblage urbanism and the challenges of critical urban theory," *CITY*, 15, 2, 2010, 225-240; and Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, "The 'urban age' in question," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, forthcoming 2013.

alleyways, signifying a misconceived methodological orientation or research pathway. But, with persistence, patience, reflexivity and a bit of good teamwork, these ventures may also foreshadow breakthroughs towards new epistemological, analytical or practical horizons, yielding potentially fruitful perspectives for thought, representation, imagination or action in relation to our rapidly changing planetary urban landscape. The UTL aims to create a collaborative intellectual and pedagogical space in which such theoretical experiments may be pursued— rigorously, ambitiously and collaboratively.

There is plenty of room for debate regarding the inheritance of twentieth century urban theory and its potential applications to emergent twenty-first century formations of planetary urbanization. But the work of the UTL is premised on the assumption that contemporary

challenges in urban theory must be confronted in reflexive dialogue with earlier efforts to demarcate the contours of the urban question, always understood in the historical-geographical context(s) of their production and appropriation in urban research and practice.

In each case, these traditions must be appropriated critically, in relation to the uncertainties, dilemmas and concerns of the present moment. This hermeneutic of intellectual appropriation permits old texts and traditions of urban studies—for instance, the “radiant urbanism” of Louis Wirth; or the approach to “planetary zoning” of Constantinos Doxiadis—to be rediscovered from new angles and for new purposes. It also opens up the exciting prospect of resituating hitherto subterranean, marginalized or counter-hegemonic traditions of urban theory into the analytic heartlands of contemporary debates on urban questions.

The UTL is concerned with nearly all forms of urban knowledge, including urban ideologies and ideologies of urbanization—since it is, after all, via the realm of ideology that powerful institutions (states, corporations) and social forces narrate, justify and mobilize their own strategies of intervention into social relations and built environments at every imaginable spatial scale.⁶

Crucially, the UTL's endeavor is conceived, fundamentally, as a form of *critical* urban theory. The metanarratives on urbanization elaborated in the Lab will not be understood as neutral, scientific depictions of historical or contemporary trends. Instead they will be *positioned*—reflexively embedded within our own global space/time context; and *positional*—reflexively attuned to the

⁶ David Wachsmuth, "City as ideology," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, forthcoming 2013; Kanishka Goonewardena, "The urban sensorium, space, ideology, and the aestheticization of politics," *Antipode*, 2005, 46-71.

institutionalized geographies of power, injustice and struggle with which the landscapes of modern capitalist urbanization are enmeshed.⁷

As pursued here, therefore, the goal of critical urban theory is not only to illuminate historical and contemporary forms of this politics of space, but to excavate its variegated historical geographies for *possibilities*, often suppressed through ideological totalization or institutional violence, that point towards alternative forms of shared urban/planetary social life and spatial organization.⁸

⁷ See David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*. London: Verso, 2012; Andy Merrifield, *Dialectical Urbanism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006; Peter Marcuse and Ronald van Kempen eds., *Of States and Cities: the Partitioning of Urban Space*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; Jenny Künel and Margit Mayer eds., *Neoliberal Urbanism and its Contestations*. New York: Palgrave, 2012; and Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. London: Polity, 2007.

⁸ The concept of a "politics of space" is derived from Henri Lefebvre, "Reflections on the politics of space," in *State, Space, World*, edited by Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, pp. 167-184. On the politics of critique in urban theory, see Neil Brenner, "What is critical urban theory?," *CITY*, 13, 2-3, 2009, 197-207, and Peter Marcuse, "Whose right(s) to what city?," in Neil Brenner, Margit Mayer and Peter Marcuse eds., *Cities for People, not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*. New York: Routledge, 2011, 24-41.

This ineluctable horizon of possibility—the prospect of more radically democratic, socially just, culturally liberating and ecologically sensible forms of urbanism at a planetary scale—serves simultaneously as an epistemological starting point and as a politico-normative orientation for the work undertaken in the UTL.

Just as urban questions defy inherited disciplinary boundaries, so too must the work of the UTL draw upon a broad array of intellectual tools, methods and materials to animate its explorations. This means that the fragmentation of urban conditions and sociospatial realities enforced through disciplinary divisions of labor must be rejected in favor of approaches that draw upon intellectual resources from across the social sciences, the humanities and the legal, planning and design disciplines, among other fields.⁹

The UTL's work must avoid sectarian orthodoxies, seeking theoretical inspiration and methodological traction through eclectic combinations of work from heterodox approaches in each of these intellectual worlds. Regardless of how such theoretical appropriations are sutured together, they are not metaphysical commitments but strategic orientations: they become intelligible only in relation to specific research questions, objects/sites of inquiry, pathways of exploration and politico-normative concerns.

Consequently, the UTL's search for theories, concepts and methods adequate to the manifold challenges of understanding twenty-first century urbanization must necessarily be open-ended—it may yield unexpected results or produce surprising new horizons for further investigation

⁹ Henri Lefebvre, "Fragmentary sciences and urban reality," in *The Right to the City*, included in Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 94-96.

and strategic intervention. Long-trusted approaches or assumptions may prove stale, misleading or obsolete; and ideas previously ignored, dismissed or viewed with suspicion may unexpectedly acquire powerful new applications as perspectives and agendas evolve. Such theoretical and epistemological gymnastics must be welcomed as routine research maneuvers rather than being viewed as analytical setbacks, detours or roadblocks.

One additional challenge lies at the heart of our work—namely, that of connecting urban theory to *new visualizations* of urbanization processes. We view the projects of urban theory and urban mapping/cartography as inextricably connected. Inherited urban theories necessarily entail specific mappings of the world, whether they are reflexively articulated or tacitly presupposed.

Accordingly, our research seeks to excavate the cartographic assumptions and visualization strategies that underpin the major traditions of twentieth and early twenty-first century urban theory. On this basis, we aim to develop new ways of visualizing urbanization that supersede inherited metageographical binarisms (for instance, urban/rural, town/country, city/non-city, society/nature) and thus offer new perspectives for understanding the variegated and deeply polarized geographies of our urbanizing planet.

Unless urban theories can be translated into spatial representations that are appropriate to emergent conditions, inherited metageographical assumptions and binarisms will continue to haunt our understanding of urban processes, and will seriously impede our capacity to shape them.

This endeavor is closely connected to a strong critique of contemporary mapping technologies. During the last several decades, new visualizations of diverse terrestrial conditions—from population distributions and densities, land use patterns and infrastructural arrangements to human environmental impacts—have been produced and widely circulated.

Unlike traditional representations of such conditions, which have usually been derived from census and topographic surveys, these new visualizations have been based upon the use of remote sensing technologies (in particular, satellites) and new techniques of geospatial analysis (such as geographic information systems [GIS]) to measure and map the phenomena under investigation. From the popular diffusion of nighttime lights images and the everyday use of global positioning systems (GPS) and Google Earth to the proliferation of satellite

images derived from more specialized forms of spatial data on populations, settlements, infrastructures and landscapes, geospatial visualizations have become a commonplace reference point used to illustrate or justify diverse interpretations of the world's built and un-built landscapes at nearly every conceivable spatial scale.

While we believe that geospatial data and images can indeed be used to illuminate and influence urbanization processes, their deployment to date has been hindered by the perpetuation of what we term the *photographic illusion*. This entails the treatment of geospatial visualizations as if they were mimetic, photographic representations of spatial conditions and distributions. In fact, such visualizations are never a direct 'mirror of nature' (Richard Rorty), but are invariably mediated through a combination of underlying theoretical

assumptions manifested in spatial taxonomies, and techniques of data processing through which such taxonomies are combined with spatial information to 'pixelate' and color-code an image.¹⁰

For this reason, a critique of geospatial ideology is a necessary precondition for any reflexive appropriation of remotely sensed data and images in investigations of contemporary urbanization processes. By revealing the pervasive yet often hidden metageographical assumptions that invariably underpin geospatial visualizations, our work subjects them to critical interrogation and, where appropriate, radical reinvention via the cutting edge approaches to visual representation that are under development among faculty and students at the Graduate School of Design.

¹⁰ Laura Kurgan, *Close up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology and Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

In this way, the UTL builds upon and animates the vibrant design cultures and cartographic expertise that pervade the GSD. The development of new theories of urbanization can thereby be translated into new visualizations of ongoing spatial transformations across places, sites, territories and scales.

Such visualizations may in turn inspire and animate the development of new theoretical perspectives (concepts, methods, analytical orientations, research strategies) through which to investigate, to render intelligible, and ultimately, to influence the shape and pathway of planetary urbanization. This dialectic of theory development and visualization will remain central force in our work, continually opening up new horizons and possibilities for imagination, explanation and action.

In the years ahead, we hope to explore a variety of questions and to pursue diverse forms of research, analysis and mapping, starting from these general epistemological premises. While our present agendas focus on the broad *problematique* of planetary urbanization, we hope that the intellectual agendas, orientations and methods developed in the Lab may prove useful to urbanists grappling with a wide range of issues and problems.

Our own projects and aspirations will necessarily continue to evolve in critical dialogue with others, and in relation to a rapidly evolving, deeply conflictual worldwide landscape of urbanization, urban restructuring and sociopolitical struggle.

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www.urbantheorylab.net



Based at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the Urban Theory Lab (UTL) is a research team concerned to rethink the basic categories, methods and cartographies of urban theory in order to better understand and influence emergent forms of planetary urbanization.

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