



## Rethinking 'elsewhere'

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Rethinking 'elsewhere'

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Engaging comparative urbanism: art spaces in Beijing and Berlin, *Julie Ren. Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2021. 182 pp., ISBN 978-1-5292-0705-7, £75 (hardback).*

It has been more than a decade since recognition of the parochialism of urban theory led to calls for decentering the production – and diversifying the sources – of knowledge about the urban (Robinson 2002; Roy 2009). While the scope of studies published in major urban geography/studies journals has expanded over this time frame, it is still questionable to what extent cities located outside of the 'Global North/West' have been treated equally as sources of urban knowledge or theories and to what extent studies of these cities have been included in wider conversations beyond the geographical regions they are seen as part of. 'Nowhere is this more evident than with the scholarship on urban China,' as noted by Ren in her 2021 book, *Engaging comparative urbanism: Art spaces in Beijing and Berlin*. She notes that, while there has been a deluge of academic publications on urban China, these studies have yet to generate much meaningful engagement with scholarship focused on other places (see also Kong and Qian, 2019). 'New geographies of theory' (Roy 2009, 819) may be forming, but the 'ongoing conversations across the world of cities' (Robinson 2011, 19) are still often geographically fragmented or skewed.

Situated within this context, Ren's (2021) book is an important intervention in and contribution to the ongoing debates on parochialism in urban studies. By bringing Beijing and Berlin into conversation with each other, this book examines common themes emerging from the 'motivations and practices of making art spaces' (Ren 2021, 6) in two cities to advance conceptualizations of urban 'spaces of possibility' and 'aspiration' (191). This book builds upon the argument that an experimental, comparative gesture is necessary for addressing the parochialism of urban theory and moving towards a more global urban studies (Robinson 2011; 2016a; 2016b). Ren contributes to this endeavor a concrete example of doing and theorizing from comparative urban studies. She engages 'comparative urbanism as a methodologically oriented critique' (Ren 2021, 7) and operationalizes comparative urbanism through 'a relational mode of comparison' (23) that focuses on connections rather than similarities or differences between sites. Ren further engages and operationalizes comparative urbanism's emphasis on the revisability of concept (Robinson 2016a; 2016b) by adopting grounded theory and the idea of mid-range theory to theorize the concept of aspiration across art spaces in Beijing and Berlin, arguing for 'celebrat[ing] the mid-range as a robust space for urban theorization' (Ren 2021, 120). Using these epistemological and methodological strategies, Ren eloquently demonstrates how a comparative study can be conducted and written relationally between two cities that may be seen as incommensurable by conventional standards, as well as how theory can be generated from comparative empirical research on two cities that are both 'burdened with the spectre of exceptionalism' (2021, 21).

Chapter 1 introduces readers to the dual aims of the book: to develop ‘an understanding about aspiration in the city’ through studying place-making practices of art spaces in Beijing and Berlin; and to engage ‘comparative urbanism as both a critical intervention in urban theory, and a guidepost for research design’ (Ren 2021, 6). The latter is further clarified in Chapter 2 where Ren succinctly reviews three major premises that have been offered as ‘explanations for why urban theory suffers from its parochialism’ (19): geography, developmentalism, and scientific method. Building upon this review, Ren details how she engages and operationalizes comparative urbanism in her research design, with ‘a relational mode of comparison’ that aims at ‘theory-building for the mid-range’ (20).

Chapters 3 to 5 elaborate on main themes emerging from Ren’s study of art spaces in Beijing and Berlin. As the focus is on how this study may contribute to conceptualization of ‘aspiration’ in the city, these empirical chapters start with an investigation of motivations behind art spaces, which, as Ren describes, are myriad. These aspirations then have to reconcile with the ‘economic, social and political structural contexts’ (53) that these art spaces locate in. In Chapter 4, Ren vividly illustrates how art spaces’ acute awareness of their precariousness leads to strategic participation in their structural economic contexts. The outcomes of the reconciliation between ‘envisioning art spaces’ (Chapter 3) and ‘making do’ (Chapter 4) are discussed in Chapter 5 as spatio-temporal expressions, which emphasizes the mutually constitutive relationship between ‘the spatiality of the art space’ and ‘its temporal characteristics’ (83). Throughout these empirical chapters, we see how art spaces leverage different kinds of ‘elsewhere’ to make ‘here’ possible: art spaces differentiate themselves from commercial actors (elsewhere) in the art world, while commercial galleries and institutional employment also function as the necessary elsewhere for some artists and curators who run art spaces to generate financial capital; having access to embassies and their political backing (elsewhere) provides European artists and curators ‘a protective retreat’ (Ren 2021, 134) in the ambiguous legal context of Beijing; the difference between art scenes or urban environments elsewhere and those of Beijing or Berlin affects the location choice of some art spaces; and so on. Ren highlights how temporal patterns of art spaces—relative temporariness or continuity—and the associated spatial expressions are produced in relation to the temporalities of their adaptive strategies, structural contexts, and artistic motivations.

The book’s key theoretical contribution on developing an understanding about aspiration in the city is discussed in Chapter 6. This chapter first highlights that, despite being situated ‘in a context of inevitabilities’, art spaces enact ‘a space of possibility in the city’ (Ren 2021, 128), and that aspiration, as ‘a navigational capacity’ (131) and ‘a notion about becoming’ (133), is central for enabling art spaces to function as spaces of possibility. Furthermore, Ren argues that her study demonstrates not only that aspiration is constantly (re)articulated through the negotiations between desires and environments, but also the importance of ‘the presence of elsewhere’ in shaping such negotiations: ‘This was significance for both the imagination of the possible, and for its attainment’ (134).

Having summarized the content of this book, the rest of this review intends to develop a conversation with Ren's arguments, focusing particularly on the concept of elsewhere.

'Elsewhere' is a keyword for this book. It starts with Chapter 1 being titled 'Elsewheres' (Ren 2021, 1), within which Ren highlights that '[t]his study of art spaces illustrates Doreen Massey's (2011) principle that cities are constantly being made and remade in relation to elsewhere' (6), and ends with Ren's argument that 'the presence of elsewhere' (134) is key to understanding how aspiration works through art spaces. 'Elsewhere' is also an important notion engaged in the comparative urbanism literature for addressing the parochialism of urban theory; as argued by Robinson: 'a more global urban studies' requires 'theory cultures which are alert to their own locatedness and sources of inspiration, open to learning from elsewhere' (2016a, 188). Given this book's focus on engaging comparative urbanism, it is therefore somewhat surprising that this notion of elsewhere in comparative urbanism literature is not explicitly discussed in the rest of the text, although Ren ends the book with a brief reflection on the need for troubling 'the way that places are thought in relation to one another' (2021, 135). Perhaps this omission is due to Ren engaging comparative urbanism more as 'a methodologically oriented critique' (7) in this study whereas the notion of elsewhere in comparative urbanism literature relates more to its epistemological intervention.

In my view, comparative urbanism is as much an epistemologically as a methodologically oriented critique. After all, the fact that 'cities exist in a world of cities' (Robinson 2011, 1) means that 'any act of urban theorization from somewhere is by necessity a comparative gesture' (Robinson 2016b, 5). Therefore, even in a study that is not designed to be a comparison of cities, a comparative gesture is inevitable: we are always thinking cities/the urban through and with elsewhere. Comparison, understood in this way, is about:

the broad practice of thinking cities/the urban through elsewhere (another case, a wider context, existing theoretical imaginations derived from other contexts, connections to other places), in order to better understand outcomes and to contribute to broader conceptualizations and conversations about (aspects of) the urban. (Robinson 2016b, 5)

The critique and intervention of comparative urbanism, in this regard, is precisely about questioning which elsewhere tends to be seen as relevant and be included, and which elsewhere tends to be seen as irrelevant and be excluded in such comparative gesture. Ren ends her book with this point.

Thus, although not explicitly engaging with the notion of elsewhere as it is mobilized in comparative urbanism literature, Ren's comparative study of Beijing and Berlin contributes to the epistemological intervention of this set of literature by highlighting the need to be 'open to "thinking with elsewhere"' (Robinson 2016a, 188) and to rethink the relevance of different elsewheres. On the one hand, Ren proves that, despite the drastically different political and economic contexts of these two cities, a relational comparison between Beijing and Berlin is both possible and illuminating for understanding experiences of art spaces in both. And on the other hand, she demonstrates that, notwithstanding the perceived exceptionalism of both

cities, the empirical findings can generate theoretical conceptualizations that carry broader implications for elsewhere. These contributions are especially significant given the persistent tendency in urban studies to view certain cities as less relevant to broader conversations about cities/the urban, where knowledge from and about these cities is routinely overlooked. Ren argues at the end of this book that '[e]ssentializing findings from Beijing as non-Western makes no sense' (2021, 135) and this statement has two interconnected layers: that Beijing is not disconnected from the circulations and dynamics affecting 'Western' cities (while acknowledging local contexts also play roles in shaping outcomes), and that the geographical location of Beijing should not by itself justify the inclusion or exclusion of it in different conversations about cities/the urban.

A second thread of conversation that I want to develop on 'elsewhere' concerns Ren's argument about the importance of 'the presence of elsewhere' (2021, 134) for understanding aspiration. While Ren starts Chapter 5 with an emphasis on the intertwined relationships between temporality and spatiality that produce art spaces as 'spatio-temporal expressions' (83), her discussion on leveraging elsewhere for aspiration does not clearly recognize that elsewhere is *also* a spatio-temporal expression. The case of an art space making 'speculative promise' (135) about its new location is discussed as one example of an elsewhere being mobilized for sustaining a space of possibility, but Ren stops short at examining how temporal and spatial dimensions co-constitute the elsewheres being drawn into (re)articulating aspirations. Here, I am especially reminded of the case of 798 arts district in Beijing, which Ren brings up from time to time in this book, including in the discussion on the presence of elsewhere for aspiration. The elsewheres leveraged in the efforts of 'saving' 798 from being demolished in the early 2000s include not only concurrent international political and media circles, as noted by Ren, but also historical and speculative connections that the place entails. As my examination of the case shows, artists submitted a motion to Beijing Municipal People's Congress on saving 798, which strategically frames the place as a significant historical witness to the socialist friendship between China and East Germany and the arts district as instrumental for building an image of global city for Beijing (Zhang 2018). These place frames, or elsewheres, were formed through, and their importance depended on, waving temporal and spatial dimensions together: the place in a romanticized past and the city in a speculative future.

Attending to elsewhere as a spatio-temporal expression also helps highlight the contradictory role that elsewhere can play for aspiration, beyond the former's function for imagining and attaining the possible (Ren, 2021, 134). In the case of 798, the elsewheres leveraged by artists for saving the arts district became basis for the municipal government to re-frame 798 as a destination for tourism and entertainment rather than art, which facilitated its commercialization (Zhang 2018). Elsewheres initially played an important role in sustaining 798 as a space of possibility, but eventually contributed to its downfall. This point is hinted at times in Ren's discussion on some art spaces' attempts at taking advantage of the instrumentalization of creativity in urban policy and for real estate development: that the 'speculative promises' (2021, 134) these art spaces make about their locations could have detrimental impacts. However, the contradictory role that elsewhere can play for these spaces' aspirations is unfortunately not explicitly discussed in this book.

Another example of art space strategies discussed in this book is artists and curators who run art spaces by obtaining resources from the art market and broader art network. Ren indicates that leveraging this kind of elsewhere is only accessible to 'a narrowly resource-rich group of actors' (2021, 79) due to the unevenness of the art world. However, questions remain about how the spatiality (the unevenness) and temporality (circulation, mobility, and rhythm) of the art world and art market shape art markets' functions as elsewheres for the aspirations of different art spaces: To what extent does the increasing demand for artists, or their works to be present at spectacular international art events (Zhang 2019), enable or restrict (or both at once) the pursuits of those who attempt to leverage this elsewhere for sustaining art spaces? How might the intersection between the spatiality and temporality of the art world and art market privilege some art spaces and artists over others?

Attending to elsewhere *as* a spatio-temporal expression would help shed light on above questions and further enrich understanding of the relationship between elsewhere and aspiration that Ren develops in this book. Bringing specific elsewheres into the discussion would also help. For example, in my research of arts district and artist community in Chongqing, I found that artists and curators based in this city are constantly mobile between different sites: a gallery show in Shanghai, Art Basel in Hong Kong, a short residency in Berlin... The fact that Chongqing, unlike Beijing and Berlin, is not widely seen as a center for the art world, placing Chongqing actors under more pressure to be present at urban art centers, which is simultaneously limiting for their artistic pursuits and necessary for them to experiment and enact spaces of possibility in Chongqing. Here, the above two threads of conversation on 'elsewhere' connect: thinking through and with an elsewhere (Chongqing) helps further the theorization of the relationship between elsewhere and aspiration.

Bringing Chongqing into this discussion also opens a question about the treatment of Beijing and Berlin as research sites in this study. In this book, Ren's focus is understandably on conducting 'a relational mode of comparison' (2021, 23) between two seemingly incommensurable cities to demonstrate how comparative urbanism can be operationalized. The attention to connections, however, runs the risk of 'flatten[ing] difference' (Jazeel 2019, 8), which Ren acknowledges and discusses her caution in this respect. What remains to be discussed, is how attending to Beijing and Berlin as singularities might differently enrich our understandings of the set of issues covered here. In other words, this study can be alternatively positioned to engage Jazeel's (2019) call for 'a methodological disposition toward singularity ... to facilitate the decolonization of geographical knowledge production' (6).

I hope it is clear that my engagement with Ren's arguments here intends to extend them and open more conversations about the important points that Ren makes in this book, especially as a fellow researcher who has similarly been interested in the interaction between art and the city and been engaging postcolonial critiques of the cultures of theorizing. In summary, this book is a laudable example of engaging and operationalizing comparative urbanism for 'a more global urban studies' (Robinson 2016a, 188). Ren's study highlights the possibility and necessity of thinking through and with elsewhere and being open to ideas from different elsewheres for

understanding and theorizing the urban. As I have attempted to show above, this book can act as both a helpful guide and inspiration for those who (want to) partake in the endeavor of reshaping the cultures and geographies of urban theorizations.

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#### Bio:

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