



Defining the Urban:

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Chapter 1: Defining the Urban: Why Do We Need Definitions?

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1. Our Urban Present

Urbanization has been declared a planetary condition (Lefebvre 2003, Brenner 2014). It is felt strongly in countries around the globe, even in those not fully urbanized. Cities are the engines of the modern economy. The interconnections between them affect social norms. They drive directly and indirectly global environmental change (Rockström et al. 2009), but are also highly vulnerable to it (Romero Lankao and Qin 2011, Revi et al. 2014). Interest in the urban has never been greater.

Cities and urban processes have moved to the core of research agendas across several academic disciplines and emerging interdisciplinary fields. The “fundamental change in the speed, scale and scope” of urbanization over the past three decades and the emergence of “different urban forms and constellations” (Schmid 2014, 203) have triggered the development of new analytical frameworks and practical tools to model, understand, and manage sociospatial change.

Beyond academia, urban processes feature in key international policy and practice discourses. The links between cities and the environment have become central to the agenda of the *UN Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD) and the *UN Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC). The development of the sustainability agenda within the United Nations now includes a set of specific Sustainable Development Goals, one of which will push efforts “to make cities safe, resilient and sustainable” (UN-DESA 2015, Goal 11). Urban sustainability is also a consistent theme within the New Urban Agenda adopted at Habitat III in 2016 (United Nations 2016).

With projections suggesting that the world will be two-thirds urban by 2030 (UN-DESA 2014), it is an urgent, yet neglected, need to survey how the urban is understood across its different dimensions, what kind of implications current urbanization trajectories may bring about, and how we are to respond in order to enhance urban sustainability (UN-DESA 2015, UN-HABITAT 2016).

2. The Urban Paradox

The fundamental idea that cities can be a source of benefits *or* threats to their inhabitants, what we refer to as the *urban paradox*, has engaged almost all academic disciplines and professional practices with an interest in the urban. Basic urban attributes take on different hues when viewed through different disciplinary lenses. Population density, for example, may be seen as positive for economic activity (Chapter 6), but negative for disease transmission or pollution exposure (Chapter 15).

In fact, the urban has been a staple feature in several academic disciplines, whether as a backdrop to inquiries or as the actual focus of research. In the last century, the study of particular cities and the development of methods to capture their characteristics has dominated urban research agendas (Schmid 2014). As the dominant mode of living in the twenty-first century becomes urban, the persistent debate about whether cities produce “good” or “bad” outcomes is set to intensify and will remain a key topic of inquiry.

3. Theorizing the Urban

Perhaps the first coordinated academic effort to engage with the urban took place at the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s and 1930s. Scholars such as Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth, among several others, drew analogies between urban and ecological systems and examined the city as “interdependent parts that each had a unique impact on human behavior and interaction” (Chapter 2).

Writing in the 1960s, Lefebvre (1991, 1996, 2003, 2004) famously asserted that urbanization can be analyzed using a three-dimensional approach to space, that is, (i) perceived space (the built environment); (ii) conceived space (the representation of space or the social definition of space); and (iii) lived space (space used and appropriated by residents in their everyday). Harvey (1985, 1996, 2001) affirmed that urbanization is a manifestation of the capitalist mode of production in that cities are constructions of capital accumulation that exacerbate existing inequalities.

Particular attention has since been paid to various urbanization phenomena, such as the formation of global cities and world cities (Sassen 1991, Knox and Taylor 1995); gentrification and regeneration in cities (Zukin 1995, Smith 1996); and the emergence of new urban configurations (Soja 2000). Actor-network and assemblage theorists have recently turned to examine the relational nature of cities (Fariás 2011, McFarlane 2011).

Comparative studies of urbanization abound. For example, shrinking cities in the “developed” world (Oswalt and Rieniets 2006) have been contrasted with new forms of informal settlements and sprawling megacities in the “developing” world (Roy and AlSayyad 2004, Davis 2006). Attempts to conceptualize cities “beyond the West” (Edensor and Jayne 2011) and to develop methods for comparative analysis (most importantly, Robinson 2006, 2011) are increasingly common. In this respect, Robinson (2016) and Friedmann (2014) assert that comparative urban research is important for the identification of multiple patterns and pathways of urbanization.

An important circumstance outside the field of urban studies has been the emergence of sustainable development as a pre-eminent theme in academic, practice, and policy discourses. From the outset of the debate in the mid-1980s cities were seen as having major impact on sustainable development trajectories, whether negative due to unsustainable patterns of resource consumption and waste generation (Rees and Wackernagel 1996) or positive by being

hubs of innovation (Mieg and Töpfer 2013). This has solidified the importance of cities in academic agendas, making the study of urban processes a truly multidisciplinary endeavor.

Not least because of such multidisciplinary efforts, cities are now widely recognized as complex adaptive systems (for example, Holland 1992, Allen 1999, Batty, Barros, and Alves 2004), using their collective adaptive capacity to respond to change and reorganization (Portugali 2000, 2011, Portugali et al. 2012, Alberti 2016).

4. The Need to Define the Urban

This rich intellectual history of engaging with questions about urbanization and the nature of the urban, discussed above, spans across several disciplines and professional practices. *Defining the Urban* shows that this engagement with the urban can evolve over time within the various academic disciplines, professional practices, and emerging interdisciplinary approaches. A key driver of this evolution is the need for “a reevaluation of existing field-specific methodologies and for the formulation of an interdisciplinary process;” as cities are “complex constructs,” they “merit complex methods of analysis” (Celik and Favro 1988, 7). Often, when scholars are faced with increasingly complex challenges, they question the usefulness of their traditional methods and begin to borrow concepts and methods from outside their disciplines, practices, and fields.

However, interdisciplinary urban research sometimes tends to be limited to the space in-between closely related fields. For example, Doucet and Janssens (2011) confine their analysis of “transdisciplinary knowledge production” to collaborations situated within the narrow field of architecture, urban planning, and urban design. Similar examples abound in urban research and practice. Although such collaborations may succeed in blurring, slightly, traditional disciplinary divides, they will not naturally lead to truly inter- and transdisciplinary approaches in the study of the urban. In fact, the ever-present call for greater collaboration between

different disciplines is little more than lip service if concrete efforts to bridge the gulf in knowledge, approaches, and working practices remain amiss.

We acknowledge that there can be hurdles to conceptual and methodological pluralism if scholars and practitioners venture beyond the boundaries of their own and closely related disciplinary fields. In particular, those “with a specialization in one area [may] lack familiarity with basic source material and methods in secondary fields,” making them vulnerable to be misled (Celik and Favro 1988, 7). Importantly, “the intermingling of methodologies blurs definitions and obscures standards of evaluation” (ibid.).

Hence, we believe that distilling a genealogy of the urban, identifying clear research and practice foci, and outlining definitions of the urban across academic disciplines, professional practices, and emerging approaches is a necessary precondition to creating a common understanding among urban researchers and practitioners. This shared understanding can facilitate true inter- and transdisciplinarity in urban research and practice. This has been a major reason that led us to pursue *Defining the Urban*.

5. Has the Urban been Already Defined?

The urban is often amounted to “varied *assemblages* of certain measurable characteristics,” understood as “inherently spatial,” and juxtaposed to its “counter-concept,” the rural (Friedmann 2014, 552). Ultimately, the notion of urbanization (or “becoming urban”) does not yet appropriately capture the wide range of current patterns in sociospatial transitions. Although efforts to define the urban exist within academia and practice, definitions of the urban have not been universally agreed or accepted.

To give an example from policy and practice: the United Nations does not use a single, globally accepted definition of the urban (UN-DESA 2014). Rather, the estimated rate of global urbanization reflects a mix of country-specific definitions based upon one (or more) of the following criteria:

- administrative areas designated as urban/certain named towns;
- any place with a municipality;
- a population threshold, ranging from 200 (Denmark) to 20,000 (Netherlands);
- some combination of thresholds in terms of population, number of dwellings (Peru), economic activity profile, population density, or even a minimum number of prescribed services such as a secondary school, grid connection, health centre, or telephone service (Oman)

Ultimately, definitions of the urban are as many as there are member states. To further complicate matters, these definitions change over time as countries re-assess their different contexts. Therefore, the assertion that we live in a global “urban age” as a result of crossing a 50% urbanization threshold is often criticized for its reliance on arbitrary and inconsistent statistical data (Brenner and Schmid 2014).

There have also been some few efforts to define the urban in the academic literature. For example, Sayer (1984) argued that the urban is not a single object and pointed at the power of ideology in our imagination of the city—specifically, our tendency to romanticize the rural and demonize the urban, when in fact the two are deeply connected. Brenner and Schmid (2014) declared the urban a theoretical category that stems from a historical process, rather than universal form. As Marcuse (2005) warned against “perverse metaphors” derived from the tendency to ascribe universal features when describing elements of the cities, Brenner claimed that “it is imperative to develop categories and modes of analysis that permit us to recognize the wide range of sociospatial patterns in and through which such processes unfold” (Urban Theory Lab-GSD 2014, 474).

Ultimately, Scott and Storper (2015, 12) argued that “a viable urban theory should enable us to distinguish between dynamics of social life that are intrinsically urban from those that are more properly seen as lying outside the strict sphere of the urban.” While the urban offers a

range of observable and measurable characteristics in its spatial dimensions (such as the density of built form), its other dimensions can be (and often are) subject to social construction.

A rare attempt to consider how different disciplines define the urban was presented by McIntyre, Knowles-Yanez, and Hope (2000). After surveying many of the social sciences they aimed to derive a consistent quantitative description of the urban. The success of this endeavor could be debated as many social scientists could take issue with how their discipline has been reductively characterized. However, it can also be argued that this effort made ecologists aware that other academic communities think about the urban, and that they do so in ways that might help ecology address some of its own conceptual and methodological shortcomings.

While efforts such as the ones mentioned above attempt to structure the current urban debate, our understanding of the urban in the current “Urban Age” (Burdett and Rode 2006) remains very limited and disjointed at best. Furthermore, despite the increasing availability of analytical frameworks and tools that could allow an integrated understanding of urban processes, urban theory and praxis very often maintain their dependence on outdated ideology.

From the above, it is clear that the urban, so pervasively used as a unique analytical category, remains imprecisely defined. While it is often used as a descriptive type—neither explanatory nor predictive—it is almost always based on arbitrary criteria.

6. Aims of Defining the Urban

A major difficulty in defining the urban may stem from the “disciplinary rivalries” surrounding its conceptualization (Harvey 1996, 52). We believe that the urban is such a multidisciplinary space of inquiry that no single academic discipline or professional field has the inalienable right to claim intellectual sovereignty over it.

Defining the Urban thus puts the rich and multifaceted urban debate into perspective by providing a comprehensive overview of what “urban” means and how the different academic disciplines, professional practices, and emerging approaches engage with it.

Featuring contributions by eminent experts in their respective fields, this edited volume identifies the most significant questions related to current approaches for the study of cities. Each chapter contains a dedicated section that offers a clear definition of the urban from the perspective of the respective academic discipline, professional practice, and emerging approach. Some of the other salient topics considered in each chapter include:

- the historical developments of the interest in (and engagement with) the “urban;”
- the assumptions, approaches, and methods for studying cities and urban processes, as well as their strengths and constraints;
- the relationship, exchange, and cross-fertilization with other academic disciplines, professional practices, and emerging interdisciplinary approaches

By broadly surveying the diverse disciplines, practices, and emerging approaches that engage with the urban, we aim to understand the points of departure, synergy, and conflict among their various perspectives. In this way, *Defining the Urban* will provide a stepping stone for the development of a common language—a shared ontology—in the disjointed fields of urban research and practice, setting the research agenda in the process.

7. Structure of Defining the Urban

Defining the Urban synthesizes knowledge from different academic disciplines, professional practices, and emerging approaches to offer the reader a truly comprehensive overview of established strategies to understand cities and urban phenomena.

The first two parts are concerned with the ways in which the “Academic Disciplines” and “Professional Practices” approach the city.

Part I includes chapters from the perspective of Sociology (Chapter 2), Geography (Chapter 3), Anthropology (Chapter 4), History (Chapter 5), Economics (Chapter 6), Ecology (Chapter 7), and Psychology (Chapter 8).

Part II includes chapters from the perspective of areas of work which are simultaneously academic disciplines *and* practice-based professions: Public Policy (Chapter 9), Architecture and Urban Design (Chapter 10), Civil Engineering (Chapter 11), Planning (Chapter 12), Governance (Chapter 13), Social Work (Chapter 14), Public Health (Chapter 15), and Law (Chapter 16).

Part III outlines how elements from the different academic disciplines and professional practices can combine to form transdisciplinary tools and perspectives. Specific chapters for these “Emerging Approaches” include Geospatial Techniques (Chapter 17), Urban Political Ecology (Chapter 18), Urban Metabolism (Chapter 19), Transition Theories (Chapter 20), Complexity Science (Chapter 21), and Science Fiction (Chapter 22).

The concluding chapter synthesizes the main themes emerging across *Defining the Urban*. In particular it summarizes the main definitions of the urban as provided by the different academic disciplines, professional practices and emerging approaches represented in *Defining the Urban*. It identifies an emergent typology of these definitions and the key lessons learnt through this multidisciplinary approach to *Defining the Urban*. We finish by making a plea for enhanced transdisciplinary dialogue in urban research and practice.

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