

## *Imagined Cities*

**Joana Mayer**

**Universidade Católica Portuguesa | Research Centre for Communication  
and Culture**

This issue must start by paying tribute to Edward Soja (1940-2015), Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Urbanism at UCLA, and a key figure in the fields of regional development, urban management and governance, cultural and social geography. Professor Soja's important theoretical contributions lie at the core of this issue's aspiration to discuss how the cultural and social experiences of urban life are entangled with the spatial configurations of cities, and how this mutually constitutive relation has changed in recent years. His take on this trialetic conception of space (spatiality - historicity - sociality) laid the groundwork for many of the terms he put forward to discuss this articulation in regards to specific qualities of contemporary cities (Soja, 1989). The rise of a "thirdspace" as a distinct mode of investigating, interpreting and acting on the "embracing spatiality of human life" (Soja, 1996), or his concern with an "explicitly spatialized concept of justice", and how that translates our/into ideas of democracy and human rights (Soja, 2010), pinned down many of the changes raised by globalization/localization processes and translocal policies in the shaping of today's urban imaginaries. This issue thus testifies to the continued relevance of the "spatial turn" that he never ceased to think through.

The burgeoning spatial scholarship over the last fifty years bore on the development of different fields of enquiry inside the so called traditional disciplines of the Humanities and cohered, as Denis Cosgrove states, with a post-structuralist critique of modernity's naturalistic and universal explanations and single-voiced narratives that obliterated the influence of position and context *to* and *in* the construction of knowledge (Cosgrove, 1999). As Foucault argued, if modernity was built upon an "obsession with history" and thus dominated by an hegemony of time, with its "ever accumulating pasts" and always reaching Western progress, then the mid-twentieth century may be termed "an epoch of space" - a moment no longer defined by a

development in and through time, but rather as “a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” through experiences of flexibility, simultaneity and juxtaposition (Foucault, 1986: 22). However, even though modern epistemology conceived the (cor)relation between time and space as one of subordination of the latter - deemed as being shaped first and foremost by the different stages and cycles of that time-progress that characterized modernity -, it is nevertheless clear that, in the wake of the different “turnologies” wreathing the humanities and social sciences, this “spatial turn”, despite being identified as a late-twentieth century development, reaps its seeds from writings and concerns emerging almost a century earlier.

Against the continuous growth of city areas sought to accommodate the waves of rural migrants from the Industrial Revolution onwards, the urgency of urban planning was supplemented by the acknowledgement of a dialectic relation between the physical and material configurations of the city and the social and cultural life of its inhabitants. This *urbanization* process, as a modern and Western phenomenon, provided the framework to investigate the ways those changes in the urban grid related to equally important developments in the socio-cultural, political and economic fabrics, not only in the present, but also in hindsight. Despite the different breadths of their theses, the importance of Henri Pirenne’s “Medieval Cities” (1980 [1925]) and Max Weber’s account of the way the concept of “city” had evolved alongside notions of “citizenship”, democracy or religious and political systems during medieval times (Weber, 1996 [1921]), is anchored in the idea that urban agglomerates were phenomena of social organization that had always functioned as landscapes of power - of royal and noble power, of mercantile trade, of religious authority -, thus building up as an alternative definition of modern “civilization” (Mumford, 1961).

The notion that urban sociality and the city’s material configurations had shaped one another throughout time established the importance of cities as a singular framework for social action, political formulations and cultural dispositions that both birthed and hosted industrial capitalism at the turn of the century. The heaping together of millions of people in city areas, with their massive buildings and clouds of industrial steam were at once the evidence of a nation’s greatness and the arena of social warfare - distinctive features that “were true about all great towns” and not only of a country’s capital, as Engels noted (Engels, 2009 [1845]). That is not to say, as Louis Wirth pointed out, that urbanism, as a “specific way of life”, should be commensurate with modern capitalism and industrialism, but rather that the rise of cities in the modern western world, their dimensions, extensions and social configurations were “undoubtedly not independent of the emergence of modern power-driven machine technology, mass production and capitalistic enterprise” (Wirth, 1938: 7-8).

Bolstered by this significance of the city space, “not as a mere congeries of people and social arrangements, but the city as an institution [...] the place and the people with all the machinery, sentiments, customs and administrative devices that go with it” (Park, 1915: 577), urban sociology emerged as a specific field of enquiry that regarded the urban environment as a “living laboratory”. In the early years of the Chicago School, the influence of modern technological and economic apparatuses was addressed less as co-determinant of metropolitan experience than as building a specific environment where the use of (scarce) resources created natural competition which forged complex divisions of labor, affected traditional primary relations, fostered social disorganization and influenced land-use (Wirth, Mackenzie and Burgess, 1967 [1925]).

As Raymond Williams noted, this idea of *city* as a particular “order of settlement, implying a whole different way of life”, emerges during the last decades of the nineteenth century to distinguish large or very large towns, and fosters the “increasing abstraction of city as an adjective” which starts to detach from specific sites, administrative structures or demographic concentration towards “the increasing generalization of descriptions of large-scale modern urban living” that was to lead the twentieth century (Williams, 1983: 56).

For Georg Simmel, this metropolitan experience was defined by the vertiginous pace of city life, made up of sharp discontinuities and governed by money’s use value tenets. In his seminal “Metropolis and Mental Life”, Simmel argued for a specific mode of cognitive experience that paired with the ruling forms of cities’ sociability in favoring a “specific type of individuality”, grounded in “the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (Simmel, 2004 [1903]: 13).

The most significant characteristic of the metropolis is [the] functional extension beyond its physical boundaries. And this efficacy resets in turn and gives weight, importance and responsibility to metropolitan life. Man does not end with the limits of his body or the area comprising his immediate activity. Rather is the range of person constituted by the sum of effects emanating from him temporarily and spatially. In the same way, the city consists of its total effects which extend beyond its immediate confines (Simmel, 2004 [1903]: 18).

The interplay between these socio-technological mechanisms and modern visual apparatuses foregrounded a *poiesis* of the urban space and metropolitan experience that continuously fed on each other. For instance, the architectural innovations with their use of glass and steel, as well as the birth of cinema in the late nineteenth century, the printed press with its flashing headlines and the proliferation of billboards, all contributed to this conception of the city as both *topos* and *locus* of modernity. As Michel de Certeau wrote, these technological innovations rendered a new dimension to the visual and textual experience of the city that had pervaded the arts long before and

at the same time participated in the creation of this “scopic regime of modernity”, as Martin Jay termed it (Jay, 1988):

The desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it. Medieval or Renaissance painters represented the city as seen in a perspective that no eye had yet enjoyed. This fiction already made the medieval spectator into a celestial eye. It created gods. Have things changed since technical procedures have organized an “all-seeing power”? The totalizing eye imagined by the painters of earlier times lives on in our achievements. The same scopic drive haunts users of architectural productions by materializing today the utopia that yesterday was only painted. The 1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text (de Certeau, 1988: 92).

Conversely, the two crucial characteristics articulated by Simmel – movement *of* and *through* the city, and the commodification of relationships in this context – in addition to this far-reaching genealogy of a visual and textual performative quality of the urban space were extensively theorized by key figures of the Frankfurt School. Walter Benjamin, for instance, reflects on the *flâneur* as a key figure in nineteenth-century Paris and then in early twentieth century’s Berlin, and its/his re-presentations in the surrealist avant-garde, the literary genres of the feuilleton or, later on, in the city novel. Building on Baudelaire’s “Painter of the Modern Life” (2010 [1863]) and the literary formats of late nineteenth century, Benjamin considered that the figure of the *flâneur* could be seen as an epitome of the competing forces of modernity - it emerges at a particular time of modernity and exists “on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet” (Benjamin, 2006: 40). Furthermore, as David Frisby contends, for Benjamin, the *flâneur* not only represents a historical figure in the urban context but also sheds light on his own activity and methodology as a specific mode of “*observation* (including listening), *reading* (of metropolitan life and of texts) and *producing* texts” (Frisby, 2001: 28).

These modes of observation and production were in accord with cinematic techniques and modern cities’ dispositions, as David Clarke argues, insofar as they account for discontinuity, fragmentation and grope with movement and immobility: “the practice of flânerie and the apparatus of the cinema both changed the social meaning of presence, and did so in much the same way; both effectively embraced the virtual” (Clarke, 1997: 5). As Sabine Hake argues about Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), this potential of the film medium to visually convey the sensory experience of city life was often rendered through “associative montage” as a method that aimed at capturing the fragmented aspects of modern life in the metropolis (Hake, 1994: 130). Nevertheless, this coincidence between the birth of cinema and metropolitan experience did not lend itself solely to the purpose of

cinematic techniques, but also as an important visual trope that gave rise to polarized depictions of the corrupted city against the idyllic countryside, as in Murnau's *Sunrise – A Song of Two Humans* (1927).

As David Harvey contends, this “turn to aesthetics and to the forces of culture as both explanations and *loci* of active struggle” are finely tuned in times of crises, disruption and uncertainty, since they “entail the construction of spatial representations and artefacts out of the flow of human experience” and thus serve as “broker[s] between Being and Becoming” (Harvey, 1992: 328). Hence, much in the same way that the Arcades or Haussman's vertical urban model had been determinant to the experience of the *flanêur*, in post-War cities it is the crisis of over-accumulation, accelerated growth and processes of suburbanization and exclusion, that serve both as the backdrop and representation of the “existential crisis” that forged a “postmodern condition”, as Lyotard (1984) called it.

The challenges yielded by the widespread of a global economy and the continuous blurring of physical and symbolic frontiers by new technologies of information and transportation, fostered new modes of imagining, experiencing and producing the urban landscape. As Lefebvre expounds, the heterogeneous modes of social production of space and the ways these are coded and decoded through and during historical periods take account of a dialectical relationship that endures in the symbolic practices of everyday life as much as in forms of governmentality, economic machineries or in the division of labor. Thus, this social production of space surfaces concurrently as a terrain of rational normalization and an outlet of clashing energies that become particularly acute in the mid sixties and late seventies: “[t]he rationality of the state, of its techniques, plans and programmes provokes opposition” because “state-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable” (Lefebvre, 2003 [1974]: 23).

The Western city thus becomes caught up between processes of re-construction and the memories of a changing physical landscape led by the terciarization of city-centers, gentrification and suburbanization processes. Accordingly, cultural transformations in urban life demanded not only new forms of urban and housing planning, but also entailed the rise in urban social movements which gradually come to recognize “after years of struggling on their own particular issues (homelessness, gentrification and displacement, criminalization of the poor and the different, and so on) that the struggle over the city as a whole framed their own particular struggles” (Harvey, 2012: xii). Moreover, moving on from a rather reformist and proletarian perspective on this *right to the city* that was behind Lefebvre's Marxist approach, new modalities of citizenship and urban appropriation now reckon with the economic and mediatic rise of new cultural geographies, cultural diversity, flexible and multiple

identities and a ruling precariousness. And so, just as the world becomes less and less concentric so is the urban experience increasingly graphed in the plural.

The postmodern collapse of meta-narratives alongside the weighing in of cities in the competitive hierarchy of a globalized informational economy, nurtured the critique of a coterminous relationship between urban systems and their respective nation-states (Sassen, 1991). These “world cities” or “global cities”, although not a new phenomenon (Hall, 1966), reflect not only the political and economic shifts of the late twentieth century but also the new neo-liberal semantics that steers the discursive and visual imagination of the city. At the same time, concerns about how urban spaces (both private and public) complied with changing politics of representation and democratic participation in a multicultural post-colonial moment, or the interest in how graffiti or some music genres, for example, revealed themselves as both cultural expressions and countercultural phenomena particularly in tune with modern urban experience, attest the different avenues of thought that make up the spatial turn that this text begins with. Far from building a cohesive field of enquiry, the multiplication of perspectives about the city and urban culture(s), and their growing significance in political and economic discourses, as well as in activist and artistic practices, warrant the recognition that these mnemotechnological and cultural palimpsests are continually revived through the production and contestation of urban imaginaries.

The urban imaginaries that motivate this issue are shaped by this genealogy of the city as both metaphor and materiality, giving vent to the multiple ways people continue to project “possibilities of how things *might* be” (Donald, 2005: 18). The notion of imagination is not to be conflated with fantasy – even though they might coalesce -, but rather taken as a social practice that “is central to all forms of agency” as Appadurai (1990) put it. This “work of imagination” conveys an understanding of the city as a plural entity, grounded as much in the materiality of physical space as in the historically constituted ideas about urban life. As social spaces where contradictory ideas and practices coexist, cities are the site of political, legal and economic regulation, but also of creativity and dissenting practices. Rather than unified forms then, cities are heterogenous spaces where “urban cultures of difference” (Lenz et al., 2006: 19) come into contact, where conflict and struggle constitute experience and drive change (Brantz et al., 2014). This issue wishes therefore to examine the ways in which cultural and political imagination have shaped and contested the configuration and experience of historical and present-day urban space, bearing in mind, as Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, that the ways in which we “imagine” the city determine the ways we act upon it, and vice-versa:

An urban imaginary marks first and foremost the way city dwellers imagine their own city as the place of everyday life, the site of inspiring traditions and continuities, as well as the scene of histories of destruction and crimes and conflict of all kinds. [...] An urban imaginary is the cognitive and the somatic experience of the places where we live, work and play. It is an embodied material fact. Urban imaginaries are thus part of any city's reality rather than being only figments of the imagination. What we think about the city and how we perceive it informs the way we act in it (Huysen, 2008: 3).

Against this common background, the articles in this issue translate the multiple ways in which cities have not only been imagined into existence, but also how they can be imagined otherwise. In **“Revisiting Constant’s New Babylon: City Surfaces and Saturation”**, Mallorie Chase re-evaluates Constant Nieuwenhuys’s New Babylon project to probe its contemporary import as a template for a liberated urban life. Through its model of unitary urbanism that challenges the compartmentalization of urban functions - house, working, recreation and traffic -, New Babylon is reconsidered for its potential to subvert the capitalist conditioning of urban experience. Nomadism, play, ambience, adaptation and transience emerge as features that come together in an early example of “performative architecture” that allows citizens to make and remake the images that saturate the surface of cities. Against the capitalist co-optation of visual urban culture, Chase suggests we re-examine Constant’s utopian project and reenvision saturation as a radical architectural tool to take command of urban life.

In the second article, **“Green Day’s Jesus of Suburbia: (De)constructing identities in the land of make believe”**, Sónia Pereira examines Green Day’s take on post-9/11 culture of fear in the 2004 album *American Idiot*. Through a close reading of the song “Jesus of Suburbia”, and discussing concepts such as Bauman’s postmodern wanderer, Augé’s non-places of supermodernity and Soja’s postmetropolis, the article examines how *American Idiot*, in particular through the ventures of a protagonist named Jesus of Suburbia, depicts life in the contemporary American city space.

With **“In Search of Lost Cities: Imagined Geographies and the Allure of the Fake”**, Siobhan Lyons investigates the impact of popular culture on the touristic imagination of cities. Drawing from Edward Said’s “imagined geographies” and Robert Alter’s notion of the city as “phantasmagoria”, Lyons discusses the experience of visitors when cities fail to live up to their expectations. Arguing that touristic experience is often marred by disillusionment, particularly in the case of famous cities abundantly portrayed by popular culture, the author puts forward the notion of “lost city” as the imagined, idealised urban space that lingers in the tourists’ imagination long after the experience with the actual, lived city. Engaging with recent tourist studies that diagnose an era of post-tourism, the article ultimately suggests that more than searching for an authenticity that never existed in the first place, contemporary

travellers now indulge in and openly embrace the “comforts of deception” of staged authenticity.

The article section concludes with **“A Praça do Martim Moniz e o Mercado de Fusão. Contributos para a análise dos conceitos de cosmopolitismo e cidadania cultural em políticas urbanas” [The Martim Moniz Square and the Fusion Market. Contributions for an analysis of the concepts of cosmopolitanism and cultural citizenship in urban policies]**, in which Matilde Caldas discusses how the rehabilitation project of Praça do Martim Moniz, a square in the centre of Lisbon, is framed in political documents and how these impart the debate on multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue, cosmopolitanism, and cultural citizenship. Caldas investigates how the *Mercado de Fusão* project, a street food market, was driven by a political strategy aimed at promoting Lisbon to a competitive position in the global, experience economy through strategic cosmopolitanism. After examining how urban policies, economic agents, residents and tourists coexist in this project, the article concludes with recommendations that urge future urban projects to take into consideration the practices of inclusion and exclusion that interventions in the public space are bound to promote.

In this reflection on urban imaginaries, this issue also lends an ear to two artistic voices that have been reimagining cities all over the world: street artists Alexandre Farto *aka* Vhils and Zhang Dali. Vhils (Portugal, 1987) is critically acclaimed for his groundbreaking carving technique that cuts through multiple surfaces in order to form a new image. Brought up in Seixal, an industrialized suburb across the river from Lisbon, his artistic practice is influenced by the transformations harvested by the intensive urban development the country underwent in the 1980s and 1990s. His works can be seen in cities such as Lisbon, London, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai, Moscow, Berlin, amongst many others. In 2015 he was listed by Forbes in the famous “30under30” List. In this interview he talks to Ana Cristina Cachola and Joana Mayer about creative destruction and the transfiguration of the city surface operated through his artistic practice. Zhang Dali (Harbin, China, 1963) was the first graffiti artist in Beijing and the only one throughout the early 1990s. He is also the first artist since Keith Haring and Jackson Pollock to feature on the cover of *Time* magazine. He made a reputation for spray-painting giant profiles of his own bald head on buildings throughout Beijing, placing the images alongside the *chāi* (拆) characters painted by the city authorities to indicate that a building was scheduled for demolition. He has also portrayed immigrant workers in life-size resin sculptures, with their bodies often hung upside down, with a designated number, the artist’s signature and the work’s title “Chinese Offspring” tattooed onto each of their bodies, in order to reflect on the

violence of migratory flows in China. In the interview conducted by Beatriz Hernández and Tânia Ganito he reflects on some of his most engaging works and on the rapid developments that have been changing the face of China. Discussing crucial issues such as the environment, economic growth, real estate, and the exercise of power, Zhang Dali's interview voices the troubling relation between memory, dreams and future, further urging us to think more and think better about the way urban imaginaries are constituted and materialized.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to artist Pedro Magalhães, who inaugurates the journal's 'Guest Artists' Section with his book project *take #4.1 (G minor)*. His radical "urban imagination", both rough and subdued, fully conveys the urban energy that has inspired this issue.

### **Works Cited**

Appadurai A (1990) Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture, Society*, vol. 7: 295-310.

Baudelaire C (1995 [1863]) *The Painter of The Modern Life and Other Essays*. Translated and Edited by Jonathan Mayne. 2nd Edition. London: Phaidon Press.

Benjamin W (2006) *The Writer of Modern Life. Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Edited by Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Brantz, D, Disko S and Wagner-Kyora G (2012) *Thick Space: Approaches to Metropolitanism*, Bielefeld: transcript verlag.

de Certeau M (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. California: University of California Press.

Clarke D B (ed.) (2006) *The Cinematic City*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cosgrove D (1999) *Mappings*. London: Reaktion Books.

Donald J (1999) *Imagining the Modern City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Engels F (2009 [1845]) *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. London: Penguin Classics.

Foucault M (1986 [1967]) *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopia*. Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22-27.

Frisby D (2001) *Cityscapes of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hake S (1994) Urban Spectacle in Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of the Big City*. In: Kniesche, T W and Brockmann S (eds.) *Dancing on the Volcano, Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*. Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 242-274.

Hall P (1966) *The World Cities*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Harvey D (1992) *The Condition of Postmodernity. An inquiry into the conditions of cultural change*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

Harvey D (2012) *Rebel Cities. From The Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London and New York: Verso.

Huyssen A (ed) (2008) *Other Cities, Other Worlds*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Jay M (1988) Scopic Regimes of Modernity. In: Foster H (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*. Seattle: Bay Press, 3-23.

Lefebvre H (2003) *The Urban Revolution*. Translated by Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press.

Lenz et al. (2006) *Toward a New Metropolitanism: Reconstituting Public Culture, Urban Citizenship and the Multicultural Imaginary in New York and Berlin*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

Lyotard F (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mumford L (1961) *The City in History*. San Diego: Harcourt Inc.

Park R E (1915) The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behaviour in the City Environment. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 20, No. 5: 577-612.

Park, R E, E W Burgess and McKenzie R D (1967 [1925]) *The City*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Pirenne H (1980 [1925]) *Medieval Cities. Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*. Translated by Frank Halsey. Princeton, New Jersey: University of Princeton Press.

Sassen S (1991) *The Global City*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Simmel G (2004 [1903]) The Metropolis and Mental Life. In: Miles M, Hall T and Borden I (eds.) *The City Cultures Reader*, 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, 12-19.

Soja E (2010) *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Soja E (1996) *Thirdspace. Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

Soja E (1989) *Postmodern Geographies*. New York: Verso.

Weber M (1966) *The City*. 2nd Edition. Translated by Gertrude Neuwirth. New York: Free Press.

Williams R (1983) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wirth L (1938) Urbanism as a Way of Life. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 1: 1-24.