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# Neither Here Nor There

Engaging Mexico City and Los Angeles



*“Much of urban history research has sought to pair or categorize cities on the basis of complementarity of existing source material. But these categorizations should be disrupted by a creative use of sources, and increasing inclination to fuse different sources and the adoption of original methods emerging from different interdisciplinary scholarship.”<sup>1</sup>*

Since time indeterminate, narratives have constructed distant cities for readers—from ancient Pausaneas’s portrayals of second-century Athens, to Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s accounts of a changing nineteenth-century Paris, to Steinbeck’s depictions of industrial landscapes in early twentieth-century Monterey, to Kerouac’s background of gritty alleys, bars, and flop houses in mid-century San Francisco. Such intriguing urban environments have dominated the imagination of historians, geographers, novelists, and poets. The accounts, often written by outsiders traveling through or living for some time in a city, take the form of urban biography—single-site case studies that examined the relationship between space and society at a distinct point in time.

Urban biographies described cities, their everyday situations, and their architecture according to their uniqueness and distinct features. They include humanist and historically specific works like Walter Benjamin’s *Moscow Diary* from 1927, which begins

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Cyclist cutouts heightening awareness in Boyle Heights. Mockup by Jeannette Mundy.

with a two-page reflection about how he really got to know his hometown Berlin only after visiting the Russian city.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin's characterizations of Moscow, as well as Naples, acknowledge his own Northern European frame of reference and demonstrate that the understanding of one city never stands in isolation.

If sole-city narrative implicitly depends on comparative urban "other," how should we think about similarity and difference? What constitutes a fruitful pairing? Fundamentally, urban comparisons rest on a construction of two independent objects viewed in relation to one another, even though cities are difficult to objectify and their similarities as well as differences are boundless. These are issues that scholars, including ourselves, have struggled with in order to better understand the settings of metropolitan life.

Early twentieth-century versions of comparative urbanism generally spanned vastly different cities by relying on the cotemporaneous theories of modernity and development.<sup>3</sup> Urban anthropology, history, geography, ecology, and sociology were born from their parent disciplines to conceptualize and even promulgate a more modern, progressive, cosmopolitanism. With the rise of urban studies in the twentieth century, theories about cities—rather than

the cities themselves—framed relationships among them so that the American sociologist Robert Park could discuss London, San Francisco, Osaka, and Bombay in a single sentence.<sup>4</sup> In this instance, Park's notion of a "world-city" served as an abstract structure or theory to scrutinize any individual metropolis.

However, in an era of globalization, transnational flows, and cross-border relationships and influences, this single-site focus became increasingly unsatisfying. Scholars who considered it "parochial" and "ethnocentric"<sup>5</sup> questioned its utility and argued that "the day of the individually posed idiosyncratic study of a town that has no particular analytical purpose . . . is now on the wane."<sup>6</sup> In the wake of this, over the last four decades, comparative urbanism has flourished, triggered by a desire to identify, compare, contrast, or juxtapose parallel phenomena that happen in multiple socio-spatial contexts and likely influence one another. Starting in the 1970s, a number of scholars began touting the need for comparative urban research that opens the eyes to broader urban phenomena that can be compared across municipal boundaries and national borders.<sup>7</sup> Underlying comparative approaches is the notion that urban imaginaries—this is, cities as they are imagined, contemplated, and written



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about—are “sites of encounters with other cities’ mediated through travel, migration and the circulation of images, goods, and ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

Comparative studies require identification of similarities and differences of at least two entities and use the city or the nation-state as their unit of analysis. But they are also criticized as overly constrained by fixed entities and arbitrary divisions such as municipal or national boundaries. In reality, urban networks and influences are dynamic, diverse, and transcend such boundaries.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis on comparison may also bring along the danger of homogenizing differences and disregarding local particularities in favor of extracting universal lessons to urban issues and problems.<sup>10</sup>

The flaws of comparative studies have been further exposed by postcolonial theorists critical of studies of non-western cities and their residents by scholars from the west, which they argue led to culturally inaccurate, even exoticized, representations and understandings of those regions.<sup>11</sup> They criticize the kind of patronizing view, for example, that may see Shanghai as the image of Los Angeles’s future, which in turn points the way for the even more “undeveloped” Mexico City. Geographer Jennifer Robinson

argues that urban models of both difference and similarity are inadequate: “The persistent incommensurability of different kinds of cities within the field of urban theory is out of step with the experiences of globalization, and the ambitions of postcolonialism suggest that simply universalizing western accounts of cities is inappropriate.”<sup>12</sup> Contemporary urbanists cannot and should not imagine that global cities are converging to become more alike, nor exoticize their differences. This conundrum has not slowed the production of comparative urban research.

In more recent years, a transnational perspective has gained favor in urban studies. This arose in response to criticism that comparative urbanism suffers from a static perception of the urban.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, transnational approaches focus on interdependencies, movements, and flows across borders in regions and subregions.<sup>14</sup> The goal of such approaches is to understand urban settings and experiences, as composed by multiple regional, ethnic or institutional identities and forces.<sup>15</sup> In other words, transnational urban studies wish to take down arbitrary divisions between entities so that both their interconnections as well as collisions become more apparent.



Children reclaiming the street for play in Mexico City. Photograph by Ryan Hernandez.

For transnational studies to build on the work of previous generations of scholars, urban data and ethnographic evidence that was collected and limited by administrative borders must be reexamined so that “transnational forms and processes are revealed.”<sup>16</sup> This requires employing multiple methodological lenses and traditional and nontraditional units of analysis to study the metropolis that may derive from different disciplinary fields. This is where Urban Humanities enters, with its blended trajectories and influences from urban planning, architecture, and the humanities.

If theories of globalization rest on constructs of the state, networks, economic flows, and data, transnationalism emphasizes human connections and their socio-spatial impacts, including migration, immigration, border crossings, political refugees, practices of economic exchange, as well as multicultural artistic influences and hybrid urban landscapes. Rather than flows and networks, urban humanities considers interweavings, intimacies, conflicts, collectivities, and engagement among different people and their socio-spatial contexts. If comparative urban studies lead, in the simplest sense, to ideas of same and different, a transnational urban humanities helps to better understand past

and presently linked practices between urban settings and culture.

There are three interrelated ways that urban humanities go beyond conventional comparative urban studies and contribute to our understanding of the urban. The first concerns *fused practices of scholarship* by which we explore the human dimension of transnationalism. This fusing of different data sources and methodologies from fields of study such as film, mapping, spatial and social ethnography, and public arts interventions helps enrich the description and understanding of the urban (see for example the ideas of Banfill, Presner, and Zubiaurre in this issue of *Boom*). The second contribution can be described as the *projective imperative* of urban humanities—that is, the obligation of urban scholarship to open up possibilities and envision alternative and better futures. This is distinct from the modern project’s interest in globalization and innovation, and from the development model’s particular focus on improvement through policy for those deemed deserving. For urban humanities, the emphasis on possibility rests on comprehending a complex past in relation to an intricate present, in order to construct a potential future that is neither obvious nor shared



Photographs of participants at a Boyle Heights bicycle advocacy event. Photograph by Lucy Seena K Lin.

without immersive debate. The latter is part of *engaged scholarship*, the third quality of an urban humanist approach. Urban humanities scholars working in cities uphold their own agency along with that of others, as intrinsically political, ethical, and positional. To some extent, the projective and engaged character of urban humanities expands upon those very qualities of architectural design practices. A focus on thick methods, open possibility, and engaged scholarship builds upon Benjamin's thinking about cities by resisting conventional objects of comparison like nation or state. Instead, critically framed questions and more nuanced understandings of the connectivity and influences among urban places are favored.

To flesh out this perspective, consider two studies, one in Mexico City and the other in Los Angeles. Both cities erode notions of "here" and "there" that underlie conventional comparative urban studies, because like other polyvalent locales they comprise multiplicities on nearly every dimension of analysis. Their intimate interconnections

extend through centuries, connections made literal through conquests, immigration, environmental issues, and economies, to name a few. That connective tissue sets the context for two activist studies of spatial justice in specific urban streets: research in Mexico City about reclaiming neighborhood streets for children's play, and in Los Angeles, about heightening awareness of bike commuters of necessity, for workers whose primary means of transportation is biking.

From the Mexican governmental organization Laboratorio para la Ciudad, the construct of "legible policy" was adopted to create new urban imaginaries in which streets dominated by automobile traffic could be opened to new uses by neighborhood children and other residents and bike commuters. Families living in a Mexico City neighborhood called "Doctores" joined in a series of street closures in which playing children took the place of the regular automobile traffic, exposing connections between shop and garage owners, multigenerational residents, and street vendors. The temporary closures were consistently marked in

the city with signage, banners, and chalk drawings covering the pavement to make legible to neighbors the policy that streets were safe for play.

In the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, Mexican American artists and cyclists allied to make visible their advocacy of safer streets. In collaboration with the local organizations Self Help Graphics and Multicultural Communities for Mobility, UCLA's urban humanists proposed life-size portraits of individual bicycle commuters be installed along commonly used roads. The portraits could be collaged together with maps, personal narratives, and traffic data to make legible the *need* for policy to create safe bike paths and increase awareness about a marginalized group of Angelenos.

Urban humanities scholars partnered in both undertakings, deploying traditional research strategies such as data gathering and analysis, alongside critical cartography, spatial ethnography, and creative urban interventions such as street closures to create play space. Lessons flowed in both directions, from Mexico City to Los Angeles and back again, as graduating students returned to project sites to continue their work during the summer. Each project offered activists and residents a glimpse of a new possible future in their neighborhood. The Doctores experience temporarily demonstrated that the unexpected was possible: children could take control of the street. In Boyle Heights, an inventive study made a vulnerable population visible for political urban action and in so doing startled a possible future into view.

Urban humanities attempts to sidestep pitfalls that urban studies has long been prone to: essentialism, homogenization, and the erasure of differences between cities. It also does not seek to become an exercise in futurism. For this reason, it employs engaged scholarship and community input and action to mold its proposals. It deploys a range of thick methods to understand and create possibilities for everyday metropolitan life. Rather than holding cities up as objects for comparison, our efforts link cities through practices that rely on extended engagement. That is, urban humanities seeks deep understanding through the shared actions of scholars and citizens moving within and between cities. Rather than urban solutions per se, the projects are offered as public propositions that will evolve through iterations that may lead to more permanent change. If the urban humanities evolve into a bona fide field of study, they may

disrupt not only urban studies but current academic structures as they produce not only transformative urban ideas but also new forms of scholarship that could enrich the study of cities. **B**

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> N. Kenny and R. Madgin, "'Every Time I Describe a City': Urban History as Comparative and Transnational Practice," *Cities Beyond Borders: Comparative and Transnational Approaches to Urban History*, N. Kenny and R. Madgin, eds. (London: Routledge, 2015), 14.
- <sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, trans. (London: NLB, 1979), 177–78.
- <sup>3</sup> Jennifer Robinson, "In the Tracks of Comparative Urbanism: Difference, Urban Modernity and the Primitive," *Urban Geography* 25.8 (2004): 709–23.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert E. Park, *Human Communities: The City and Human Ecology* (New York: The Free Press, 1952), 133.
- <sup>5</sup> J. Walton, and L.H. Masotti, eds. *The City in Comparative Perspective: Cross-National Research and New Directions in Theory* (New York: Sage, 1976).
- <sup>6</sup> H.J. Dyos, "Editorial," *The Urban History Yearbook* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974), 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Walton and Masotti.
- <sup>8</sup> Kenny and Madgin, 5.
- <sup>9</sup> M.P. Smith, *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001).
- <sup>10</sup> R. Madgin, *Heritage, Culture, and Conservation: Managing the Urban Renaissance* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009).
- <sup>11</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- <sup>12</sup> Robinson, "In the Tracks of Comparative Urbanism," 709–723.
- <sup>13</sup> D. Cohen and M. O'Connor, "Introduction: Comparative History, Cross-National History, Transnational History—Definitions," *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004), ix–xxiii.
- <sup>14</sup> C.A. Bayly, S. Beckert, M. Connelly, et al. "AHR Conversation: on Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111.5 (2016): 1440–64.
- <sup>15</sup> S. Khagram and P. Levitt, "Constructing Transnational Studies," *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.