Urban Constellations

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INTRODUCTION

Matthew Gandy

Urban Constellations brings together five years of work and ideas associated with the UCL Urban Laboratory, which was set up in 2005 as a unique collaboration between four different faculties for urban teaching and research. This collection reflects an array of disciplines at UCL that have engaged with the Urban Laboratory, ranging from architecture and engineering to anthropology and film studies. It also reflects the international profile of the Urban Laboratory in terms of its networks of expertise and its attraction of exceptional graduate students, some of whose work is included in this collection. This is not the first time such an initiative has emerged at UCL—in 1958 the sociologist Ruth Glass and her colleagues set up The Centre for Urban Studies— and this volume builds on these earlier interdisciplinary dialogues. "London can never be taken for granted," wrote Glass in 1964, "the city is too vast, too complex, too contrary and too moody to become entirely familiar."[1] These sentiments might apply to any city at any time: the tenor of this collection is contemplative and reflective; there are no bullet-point lists of what should be done, no definitive answers, but rather an opening up of discussion and the identification of critical themes.

The book is divided into five sections. Part one, entitled "Urban lexicons," reflects on a range of key ideas that have been the focal point of recent discussions about the future of cities and urbanisation. In part two, "Crises and perturbations," we turn to processes and developments that are shaping contemporary cities such as the effects of financial instability, the housing crisis, and the emergence of new social formations. In part three, "Excursions," we show some examples of work by young artists and photographers, who have been exploring different facets of contemporary urbanisation and urban life. In part four, "Places and spaces," the emphasis shifts to a range of specific locales to explore concrete examples of urban change, such as the impact of specific projects, the political ecology of urban nature, and the presence of collective memory in urban culture. Finally, in part five, "Projections," we link urban discourse to the visual arts and consider various vantage points from which artists, film makers, photographers, and others have sought to critically engage with processes of urban change.

The title chosen for the collection—Urban Constellations—relates to Walter Benjamin's use of the term "constellation" as a way to combine ostensibly disparate elements into a historically and intellectually intelligible schema. This implicit lineage to Benjamin's work underpins a close attention to the details and textures of everyday life in the modern city. It informs an understanding of the term "constellation" as a metaphor for context, historical specificity, and multi-dimensionality; it works against sameness, stasis, and reductionism. In Benjamin's hands, a materialist historiography "explodes the homogeneity of the epoch."[2]

The emphasis on small essays draws on Siegfried Kracauer's use of "urban vignettes" to explore specific facets of city life where even small observations are woven into a sophisticated cultural and political critique. This is not a book aimed at a narrowly specialist readership, nor is it some kind of text book containing attenuated distillations of more interesting things that lie elsewhere. Many of Kracauer's original observations on Weimar Berlin and other cities were written for newspapers rather than scholarly journals though this does not reduce their perspicacity or sophistication in any way.[3] This essay collection is aimed beyond the academy to a larger cultural arena of thinking, writing, and acting; a space in which all can play a role in the intellectual project of reimagining urban possibilities.

The authors have responded very differently to the challenge of writing small essays, ranging from the use of imaginary scenarios to more experimental forms of writing. Some essays are more personal or autobiographical in tone whilst others adopt a more distanced position in relation to their subject matter. Different writing strategies and methodological approaches are also matched by a diversity of locales extending from long-standing foci of urban research such as Berlin, Chicago, and London, to less extensively studied cities such as Chennai, Jakarta, and Lagos. The essays illuminate an interconnected skein of developments that blur both disciplinary boundaries and schematic distinctions between global North and South.

The idea of the "urban" encompasses far more than the "city" as a bounded or discrete entity, since the cultural, political, technological, and ecological impacts of urbanisation extend to the most remote regions. Yet we cannot dispense entirely with this distinction between cities and urbanisation because cities have served as catalysts for successive waves of modernity and many "city-states" also perform specific roles as nodes for connectivity and exchange.

But where should we look? What types of urban spaces should form the focus of our attention? Some of the most interesting developments can be observed at the urban fringe or in marginal zones that unsettle existing categories, concepts, or analytical approaches. In other cases, our starting point might be a single building or one cultural artefact. Questions of scale are not only relational but also strategic: we cannot include everything in our analysis—to do so would not only be impossible but also perceptually overwhelming. Much of the city must remain forever opaque: simply unnoticed or lost as fragments of memory.

Our understanding of urbanisation, or capitalist urbanisation to be more precise, is inseparable from the disruptive, pervasive, and transformative impact of capital itself, which is present either explicitly through flows, instruments and transfers, or implicitly through traces of past investment or the ideological parameters of urban culture. "Money," as Georg Simmel observes, "with all its colourlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability."[4] In this context, we can see that much urban politics and culture is precisely a struggle against the levelling effects of money and capital: the articulation of social difference, the recasting of the public realm, the defence of autonomous spaces, the creation of possibilities for creative thought itself. Yet forms of cultural and political heterogeneity can in themselves mask the spectral ubiquity of capital: in what circumstances do forms of cultural and political activity undo rather than reinscribe existing relations of power? And in what sense do forms of cultural or political upheaval periodically facilitate little more than a reorganisation of the existing order?

And what of ourselves as flesh and blood, as living inhabitants of urban space? We are part of urban nature yet also apart from it: urban nature is in a state of flux ranging from its metabolic reconstruction (power, water, and other engineered elements of urban life) to various modes of spontaneous co-existence such as bugs, dogs, and weeds. If we consider nature as an active constituent of urban life, which is itself in a state of behavioural or evolutionary change, then the presence of zoonoses or other pathogens in urban space contains an unpredictable dynamic of its own.

The materiality of urban space—the ubiquity and versatility of concrete, the advent of steel-frame buildings and ever more complex technological entanglements—also produces new kinds of vulnerabilities to disruption. At the same time, our increasingly sophisticated methods of collecting, storing, and analysing data engender a certain technological

euphoria about the capacity for controlling or modifying space that becomes another element in the techno-managerial evisceration of the political realm.

Readers may detect a certain lament in some of these essays for the lost promise of modernity, whether located in the peripheral housing estates of Copenhagen or the roads and bridges of Lagos. The prospects for design, planning or other forms of expert intervention have been thrown into question. Emerging spaces of improvisation have been accompanied by a radical dilution of the putative "metropolitan centre" to produce a more polyvalent form of global urbanism: the epicentre for modernity no longer passes through a teleological sequence from nineteenth-century Paris to its late-modern apotheosis of Los Angeles. In the place of archetypes or grand-theoretical synecdoches, we encounter a much more variegated urban terrain that links space and theory in new ways. But to what extent are these different modes of theorisation spanning neo-Marxian and other approaches philosophically commensurate? In what ways can they help us to disentangle urban developments or provide fresh insights into the history of the present? The creeping regularisation of space reflects an emerging elision between geo-political anxieties and neo-conservative moralities. As thinking human subjects we must contend with the flickering landscapes of alienated consumption and wonder what might have been different.

Endnotes

1 Ruth Glass, "Aspects of change," in *Centre for Urban Studies, London: Aspects of Change* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1964), xiii.
2 Walter Benjamin, "On the theory of knowledge, theory of progress," in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London and Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University Press, 1999 [1927–40]) [N9a,6], 474.
3 Siegried Kracauer, *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo* (Berlin: Das Arsenal, 1987 [1964]).
4 Georg Simmel, "Metropolis and mental life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950 [1903]), 414.

It is then that they feel unhindered and unthreatened by people. The night is when the day turns black and this is the moment they feel they can strike back.

In *The Ecology of Stray Dogs: A Study of Free-Ranging Urban Animals* (1973), the ethologist Alan Beck suggests that stray dogs "provide insight into the effects of urbanisation on man. Once their ecology is understood, urban dogs may serve as indicators of stress, pollution, and environmental deterioration, and as models for behavioural adaptations to urban life."[3] There are indeed apparent parallels between the human and canine inhabitants of Bucharest, as has been explored in the work of documentary filmmaker Alexandru Solomon. Referring to the situation in Bucharest at the end of the 1990s, Solomon's film *A Dog's Life* (1998) tells how "man and dog are two species intimately mingled into one another like the damned souls of Dante's inferno. Here, the human-eyed dog daily confronts the dog-eyed human. Our city has a population of over 200,000 dogs. There are rich and poor dogs, dogs of the street and dogs that go to the hairdresser. This film documents the life of this parallel society, which is a mirror of the human society in Bucharest."[4] Recently, artist Călin Dan explored the parallel and similar destinies of humans and dogs in the Romanian context in his play *Ca(r)ne: This is Our City* (2007) and film *Wings for Dogs* (2009), where he exposes in a potent manner the legacies of Ceauşescu's palace, the waste of ordinary lives, and the injustices it has produced and still engenders.[5]

The erasure of the historical parts of the city has entered a new stage with the demolition of *Hala Matache*, one of the oldest Bucharest market halls, which stands in the way of a new thoroughfare and boulevard being developed into the new business district of Bucharest; it connects Victoria Square (the government headquarters) with Ceauşescu's palace (the seat of parliament). The process has been accompanied by evictions of Roma and other urban poor from the dilapidated houses that were left to decay over the last two decades. Most of them are homeless again, building improvised shacks on wastelands in other parts of Bucharest or on the city's periphery. In another random part of Bucharest, people are reported to have poisoned the stray dogs that were living in front of their apartment blocks. The dogs have disappeared.

INTERSTITIAL LANDSCAPES: REFLECTIONS ON A BERLIN CORNER

Matthew Gandy

Endnotes

1 Maria Raluca Popa, "Understanding the urban past: the transformation of Bucharest in the late socialist period," in: Richard Rodger and Joanna Herbert (eds.), *Testimonies of the city: identity, community and change in a contemporary urban world* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 159–186.
2 Adriana Mica, "Moral panic, risk or hazard society—the relevance of a theoretical model and framings of *maidan* dogs in Chişinäu and Bucharest," in *Polish Sociological Review*, 1/169 (2010), 41–56, here 48.
3 Alan M. Beck, *The ecology of stray dogs: A study of free-ranging urban animals* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press e-books, 1973), viii.
4 www.alexandrusolomon.ro/a-dog%E2%80%99s-life-1998/ [accessed 10.04.2011].
5 Călin Dan, *Emotional Architecture 3*. (Bucharest: MNAC, 2011).

1 The Chausseestrasse site in July 2009. Photo: Matthew Gandy

It is a warm July evening in Berlin. The aromatic white flowers of yarrow *Achillea millefolium* stand out strikingly against the gloomy undergrowth of a patch of waste ground where the busy Chausseestrasse, running north-south, meets the quieter Liesenstrasse from the east. Unnoticed to most of the people walking past, this site is teeming with life as nocturnal insects dart about amidst the flowers and bats swoop occasionally from the trees. Among the interesting species found on this site is a subtly marked moth, *Cucullia fraudatrix*, an Eastern European species associated with steppes and dry grasslands, that is near the western edge of its range in Berlin. This rare species has colonised the site in part through the abundance of its larval foodplant, mugwort *Artemisia vulgaris* (known as Beifuß in German), which is closely associated with urban wastelands.[1]

This five-hectare ecological paradise marks a boundary between the district of Mitte, the centre of the former East Berlin, and "Red Wedding," the traditional bastion of working-class Berlin and one of the poorest districts of the former West Berlin. On a site where the Berlin Wall once stood, a vibrant meadow has developed full of birds, butterflies, and wild flowers dominated by brilliant blue patches of *Echium vulgare*, which goes by the extraordinary English name of Viper's Bugloss (it is also known in German as Snake's Head or *Natternkopf*).

The site is aesthetically and scientifically much more interesting than the closely managed municipal park to the north side of the street with its short turf and widely spaced trees. This urban meadow is an example of what the urban ecologist Ingo Kowarik terms "fourth nature" that has developed without any human design or interference to produce a "new wilderness." This once grim space, where East German border guards and their dogs had patrolled, has been transformed through a process of ecological alchemy into something completely different. And at the edges of this meadow, young trees have appeared—principally silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and grey alder (*Alnus incana*)—marking the first stages of a "wild urban woodland" developing in the heart of the city.[2] Parts of Berlin are returning to nature, the distinctions between nature and culture becoming progressively more indistinct, as remnants of human activity such as rubble, rusting metal, and other objects become gradually absorbed into a new kind of socio-ecological synthesis.

In the 1960s, the island city of West Berlin emerged as an international centre for the study of urban nature. Berlin, along with a number of other German cities extensively damaged by war, presented an array of so-called ruderal spaces—this botanical term is derived from the Latin word *rudus* meaning rubble—that had produced a series of novel ecological formations. In West Berlin, however, botanists looked inwards rather than to the *terrae incognitae* of the surrounding GDR and produced a series of extraordinarily detailed accounts of their city's biodiversity.[3] Artists also became fascinated by the ecology of West Berlin, including poignant works such as Paul Armand-Gette's *Exoticism as banality* (1980), which details the presence of adventitious tree species that had become naturalised in a subtle riposte to "nativist" conceptions of urban landscape: North America, for example, is represented by

the maple species, *Acer negundo*, whilst China's presence is indicated by *Ailanthus altissima*, known also as the tree-of-heaven.[4]

With the unification of Berlin, a new array of anomalous spaces became gradually integrated into the city's unique urban ecology, which ranged from former security zones to abandoned industrial facilities. Ecological surveys have revealed that levels of biotic diversity within Berlin now exceed that of the surrounding agricultural or peri-urban landscapes. At the latest count, Berlin has some 2,179 species of wild plants of which 52 per cent can be considered part of the original flora of the region before extensive human influence.[5] Botanical studies of these unusual combinations of species in Berlin and elsewhere have challenged the analytical strictures of landscape ecology. For the geographer Gerhard Hard, the study of such marginal spaces forms part of a wider intellectual assault on the conservative idea of landscape as a holistic unity that denies difference.[6] The growing recognition of the aesthetic and scientific value of spaces hitherto regarded as "wastelands" has also introduced a much greater awareness of the independent agency of nature into urban design discourses.[7] The age of labour-intensive municipal landscapes is now fading for a mix of reasons—cultural, ecological, and fiscal—so that the idea of "wild spaces" or at least "wilder" urban spaces has begun to connect with a series of environmental concepts such as "ecological floodplains" and new approaches to urban hydrology; the creation of ecological ribbons to produce a connective lattice of "green infrastructure"; and an upsurge in vernacular interest in urban nature exemplified by Berlin's now annual festival entitled "Der lange Tag der StadtNatur" [The long day of urban nature]. Over the last twenty years, an array of alternative spaces has

2 *Cucullia fraudatrix* (Eversmann, 1837). Chausseestrasse, Berlin, 17 July 2009. Photo: Matthew Gandy.

become an emblematic feature of post-unification Berlin, encompassing not just new forms of environmental awareness but also vibrant developments in art and culture.[8]

The concept of the "green city"—a theme explored extensively in the writings and projects of the Weimar-era Berlin planner Martin Wagner—is being radically reworked in a contemporary context, yet latent tensions between biodiversity, ecology, and capitalist urbanisation remain: just as Wagner and others struggled to expand public access to Berlin's lakes and other natural features in the1920s, there are recurrent tensions between conceptions of the city as an ecologically enriched public realm or a mere speculative arena.

Since 2009, however, this particular urban meadow has been fast disappearing: about one-third has become a petrol station, another third a parking lot, and the refuse-scattered remainder has been fenced off completely, marking a moment of enclosure before its final erasure. Across the street there are now billboards advertising luxury apartments. Computer-generated images show faux-Wilhelmine façades—the favoured retro look for wealthy newcomers to Berlin—along with modern blocks little different from the latest developments in London, Buenos Aires, or elsewhere.

When the GDR collapsed in 1989, there were brief hopes that an alternative and truly democratic German state might emerge, but the remnants of East Germany were quickly subsumed within the capitalist behemoth of West Germany. In the hollow imprint of the absent GDR, however, a unique medley of spontaneous landscapes has emerged over the last twenty years that provide a poignant symbol of urban possibilities. They reveal a city within a city that is not stage-managed for tourism or consumption, but open to multiple alternatives; a network of unregulated spaces within which both ecological and socio-cultural diversity can flourish. Although many of these spaces have now been lost there are still many interstitial landscapes that remain. Indeed, their eradication is not inevitable, as successful recent efforts to protect other sites across the city such as the meadows between the former runways of Tempelhof airport or the remarkable Südgelände nature reserve along an abandoned railway line attest.

Endnotes

1 See, Gabor Ronkay and László Ronkay, *Noctuidae Europea. Cuculliinae I* (Stenstrup: Apollo Books, 1994). *Cucullia fraudatrix* has been placed in category V (threatened) on the German Red List of endangered species. See *Gesamtartenliste und Rote Liste der Schmetterlinge ("Macrolepi-doptera") des Landes Brandenburg* (Brandenburg: Landesumweltamt, 2001).

2 See Ingo Kowarik, "Wild urban woodlands: towards a conceptual framework," in Ingo Kowarik and Stefan Körner (eds.), *Wild urban woodlands* (Berlin: Springer, 2005), 1–32.

3 On the emergence of urban ecology as a distinctive field of study in Berlin, see: Jens Lachmund, "Exploring the city of rubble: botanical fieldwork in bombed cities in Germany after World War II," in *Osiris* 18 (2003), 234–254; Herbert Sukopp, H. P. Blume, and W. Kunick, "The soil, flora and vegetation of Berlin's wastelands," in I. C. Laurie (ed.), *Nature in cities* (Chichester: John Wiley, 1979); and Herbert Sukopp, *Stadtökologie: Das Beispiel Berlin* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1990).

4 Paul-Armand Gette, *Exotik als Banalität / De l'exotisme en tant que ba-nalite* (Berlin: DAAD, 1980).

5 On urban biodiversity in Berlin and elsewhere see, for example: Ingolf Kühn, Roland Brand, and Stefan Klotz, "The flora of German cities is naturally species rich," in *Evolutionary Ecology Research* 6 (2004), 749–764; Stefan Zerbe, Ute Maurer, Solveig Schmitz, and Herbert Sukopp, "Biodiversity in Berlin and its potential for nature conservation," in *Landscape and Urban Planning* 62 (2003), 139–48. For further details on Berlin's flora see: http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/natur_gruen/naturschutz/artenschutz/de/freiland/wildpflanzen.shtml (accessed 3 July 2011).

6 See, for example, Gerhard Hard, *Ruderalvegetation: Ökologie und Ethnoökologie, Ästhetik und "Schutz"* (Kassel: Arbeitsgemeinschaft Freiraum und Vegetation, Notizbuch der Kasseler Schule, 1998).

7 See, for example, Gilles Clément, *Le jardin en mouvement: de La Vallée au parc André-Citroën* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1994).

8 See Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, *Urban Pioneers. Berlin: Stadtentwicklung durch Zwischennutzung / Temporary use and urban development in Berlin* (Berlin: Jovis, 2007); *Skulpturenpark Berlin_Zentrum* (Köln: Walther König, 2007).

PHANTOM LIMBS: ENCOUNTERING THE HIDDEN SPACES OF WEST BERLIN

Sandra Jasper

Behind an ordinary metal door at Berlin's underground station Rathaus-Steglitz lies a hidden world of public transport infrastructure that was never completed, Berlin's U10 underground line. Stepping into the station's carcass, one's gaze follows a tunnel hitting the dead end of a brick wall. Every once in a while, underground carriages rumble as the U9 line passes below, yet sounds are difficult to locate. A few graffiti and cigarette stubs provide hints of recent human presence in an otherwise sterile utilitarian sub-terrain. In surprisingly good condition, these "blind" tracks seem to be connectable any day. A whole collection of Berlin's residual transport structures is hidden behind doors at Rathaus-Steglitz, Potsdamer Platz, and Alexanderplatz stations, amongst others. Why, then, was the U10 line never finished or only partially constructed in the first place?[1]

The U10 line is not the only infrastructural project that was abandoned for political reasons in a city that experienced multiple ruptures from the mid-twentieth century onwards. In fact, Berlin's subterranean landscape is littered with technological relics. While the most controversial relics of Berlin's twentieth-century history were quickly removed in the 1990s, thus leaving behind spatial voids,[2] the incomplete U10 line has survived to this day. It is a technological relic of Berlin's geopolitical division and resulting cycles of politically driven investment and disinvestment in the city's infrastructural networks above and beneath the surface.