interview

The Scopic Regimes of Urban Neglect

We are living in an era of marked by many dystopian visions of the future, says distinguished urbanist **Ash Amin**. Upending them will require work, he tells **Matthew Gandy** in a wide-ranging discussion that also assesses the contemporary neglect of urban poor, their infrastructural rights, as well as the use of big data and smart technology in managing cities

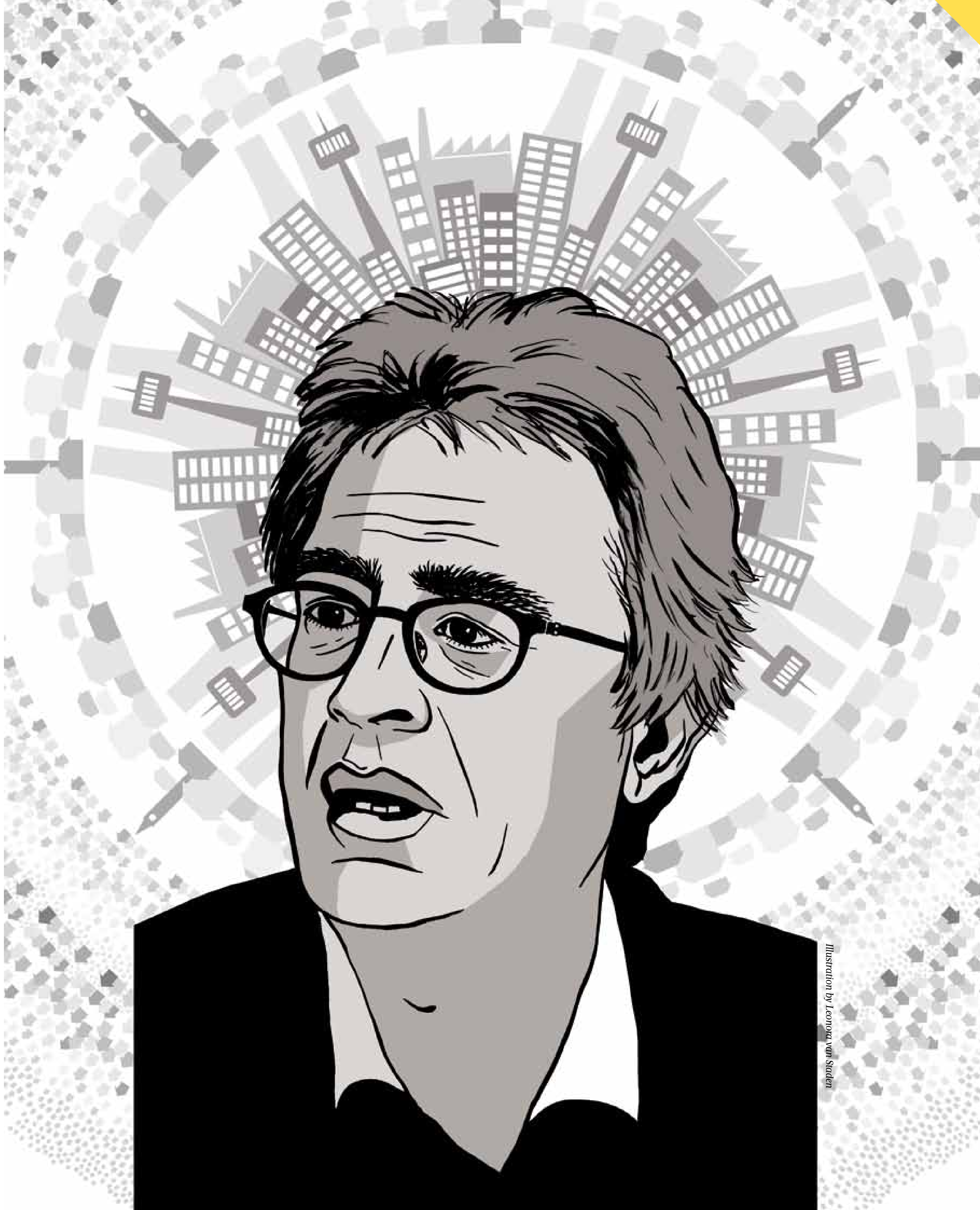

Illustration by Leonora van Staden

In 2003 UN-Habitat warned that by 2030 around a third of the world's nine billion humans could be suffering from multiple deprivations, living in slum-like conditions in the world's cities, many located in the global south. Urban attention is beginning to turn to this problem, and to questions of sustainable urban competitiveness and growth, albeit without much reference between agents focused on growth and urban privation. In his keynote address at the 40th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology, held in Delhi in February 2012, Ash Amin introduced the idea of "telescopic urbanism". The city of the future, he noted, is being looked at through the wrong end of the binoculars: while "business consultancy" urbanism is largely disinterested in the city that does not feed international competitiveness and business growth, "human potential" urbanism largely focuses on settlements where the poor are located for bottom-up solutions to wellbeing. Ideas of mutuality, obligation and commonality have all but disappeared in this new paradigm, the mechanics of which is the starting point of this conversation between Amin and Matthew Gandy.

Matthew Gandy: I'd like to begin by asking you about your essay "telescopic urbanism" ('Telescopic Urbanism and the Poor', *City*, forthcoming 2013). Do you want to tell me more about how you use that visual metaphor?

Ash Amin: The title appeared in the middle of a paper on the urban poor in the developing world, when it dawned on me that the kind of argument I was trying to make about the contemporary neglect of this very large section of humanity might have a lot to do with the emergence of a dominant optic of the city as all but a single, connected, interdependent entity. This is when I thought that this piece ought to be called "telescopic urbanism", and from then on, like any suggestive metaphor, the title acted as a prompt. The metaphor got me to think about the implications of seeing the city only in its parts, through the wrong end of the telescope. Particularly today, as cities around the world are trying to muscle up, gear themselves up for international competitiveness and the like, telescopic urbanism—as both imaginary and code of practice—regularly bypasses the poor, casting them as not part of the urban central, but as part of the urban peripheral, or another world. The metaphor became a way of forcing a thesis on urban neglect: if today the majority city and its needs are ignored by elites—perhaps also scholarship—it is because it is placed out of sight, and for this, forgotten or made anomalous, allowing the city of the thrusting few to colonise the gaze, claim the urban.

MG: In the paper you mention a contrast between what you call "page turning ethnographies" and "voyeuristic hyperbole". Can you elaborate on that tension between different modes of representing urban poverty?

AA: Yes, I wanted to bring out the contrast between two kinds of ethnographies of the poor that are becoming all the rage at the moment. On a good day, page turning ethnographies of slums and the everyday city by novelists and journalists manage to tell a compelling story of the poor, and the city at large, without reducing fortunes and lives to just these actors. They might focus on particular neighbourhoods or particular lives, but still manage to weave into that story resonances from elsewhere, such as the city's labour market geographies, the symbolic and affective atmospheres of place, the networks of exchange, remittance or longing that stretch back to villages and other continents, the impositions of the authorities and urban elites, the very ecology of dwelling, metabolic flows and infrastructural provision. These accounts somehow manage to capture the complexities confronting the poor as well as the fullness of their subjectivities and experiences, as it were, in a gesture and sweep. I am thinking of the likes of Suketu Mehta and Katherine Boo on Bombay, or Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Binyavanga Wainana on Nairobi, who manage to narrate the seen and the unseen, the experienced and the imposed, the particular and the general, all in really insightful ways—ways that scholarship on cities often struggles with. They move the telescope steadily, they focus in and out, they return to things missed the first time.

Then we have more voyeuristic accounts of the urban poor, often written by celebrated journalists and opinionated experts who parachute into a slum, stay there a few days, move off to another one in a different country or continent without waiting to form a nuanced picture of the everyday life of the poor or of their complex formative geographies and histories, succumbing to projecting from the few empathies built and insights acquired, and reducing complexities without a clear narrative or purpose to clear singularities that tell a good story. The upshot is a voyeuristic and often very crude summary of what was seen and heard in a week, and then when the comparisons have been made, the lives of the poor here and there are woven together around a set of easy metaphors, so that the poor can be narrated as survivors, entrepreneurs, clean, jolly, or their opposites, and so that a given location—including a slum with nearly one million people in it—can be spoken of in clear and general terms, without a huge amount of evidence or even literary imagination. It would be invidious of me to name names, but imagine the book equivalents of films like *Slumdog Millionaire*.

MG: In the essay you mention "citywide infrastructural rights". Can you explain what you mean by citywide infrastructural rights or the language of citywide infrastructural rights?

AA: I was trying with difficulty to retain something of Henri Lefebvre's idea of the city for all, which seems the right ambition to have for vast sections of the urban population without basic rights. At the same time, I was troubled by this idea, because in today's city of 5-10 million people, in which perhaps a third of the inhabitants are non-citizens, undocumented migrants, barely recognised as humans let alone burghers, to speak of generalised rights of urban being and participation seems unrealistic. Still, dissatisfied with the shift today in political economy away from a discourse of rights to one of capabilities and empowered subjects, I wanted to not abandon the principle of universal access to the basics of life, because without such access, even the discourse of capabilities and empowerment rang hollow—a bitter promise, and wild expectation. I came to the conclusion that a realistic way forward might be the promise of access to a commons available to all, including the poor, more specifically, access to the basic infrastructures of life, from water and sanitation to primary healthcare and education.

MG: So your emphasis on infrastructural rights is more than the UN style emphasis on universal rights?

AA: Right. The UN declaration of human rights is a wonderfully comprehensive and universalist formulation, drafted at a time of real hope for humankind, while mine is much narrower and much more specific, forced by the embedded miseries and deprivations of our times; a minimalist promise of universal access to the absolute bare essentials of life, guaranteed through a functioning urban infrastructure of supply (water, electricity, sanitation, primary healthcare, and so on). My emphasis falls on the morphology of the collective urban and on communities, rather than on the legal enforcement of a very long list of individual human rights, constantly violated by self-serving or elite-oriented authorities.

MG: The bio-political also features in some of your writings and I wondered whether you see a conceptual lineage between Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life" and Lefebvre's understanding of spatial rights?

AA: You could put the question in this way: does Lefebvre provide the solution to Agamben's conundrum that those reduced to bare life exist beyond the sovereign territory and its political rules, and are therefore non-subjects? I would say not, on the grounds that when Lefebvre writes of the right to urban life, he has assumed that the urban dweller has citizenship rights, with the city adding to a set of already acquired sovereign rights. For Agamben the non-subject in the city cannot acquire sovereign rights, while for Lefebvre the problem of subjects without formal rights does not exist! This is possibly why Jacques Derrida opted for the city of sanctuary, in which the migrant without formal rights is given access to the commons on grounds of hospitality for the stranger who makes it through the gates of the city in 'pre-political' times. The resident and the visitor must be acknowledged, all the more so in the city with a very large population without formal rights, *de facto or de jure*. You could say that my pragmatic proposal on infrastructural rights extends this kind of thinking, unpopular at a time of telescopic urbanism, governmental neglect of the poor, middle class colonisation of the city's collective assets, and popular backlash against the migrant, the stranger, and the poor.

> **"**
> **The positivist legacy has been rekindled in the 'big data' approach to the city, premised on the assumption that ubiquitous computing provides the means to capture the whole life of the city through smart mapping, GIS, street-level sensors... and so on.**
> **"**

MG: In your essay 'Urban Condition' (*Public Culture*, 2013, 25:2) you make an interesting point about the persistence of what we could term "positivist approaches" to understanding cities. How would you account for the reappearance of various forms of methodological individualism or atomistic conceptions of cities? It seems as if these arguments keep repeating themselves with different groups of disciplines in play.

AA: I'm not sure if "positivist" is the right description of orthodox urban analysis. Very few approaches, apart from a small number of contributions from neoclassical economics, read the city as an aggregation of individuals and rational choice. Instead the orthodoxy (if you could call it this) has moved towards thinking, in quite interesting ways, that the contemporary city—with all its complexities, flows, continual changes, unexpected combinations and large-scale phenomena—can be data captured. Here, the city is posed as an information challenge, which once overcome, would allow the city to be fully known and intelligently governed. The positivist legacy has been rekindled in the ‘big data’ approach to the city, premised on the assumption that ubiquitous computing provides the means to capture the whole life of the city through smart mapping, GIS, street-level sensors, the availability of individual transactions and preferences gathered from smart phones, credit cards, and so on. Its conceit is to think that the availability of sophisticated mathematical models able to work large data in nuanced ways, allows the city to be visualised and understood in all its complexities and evolving changes.

MG: So are you, in a sense, ambivalent about technology, in that it can either be good or bad in relation to urban space? So if we’re talking about smart buildings and smart cities there is an uncertainty in terms of their implications?

AA: I’m ambivalent about the premise that contemporary urban life can be mastered through large data sets. So my concern is methodological, concerning the limitations of numerical data, analytical technologies and interpretative certainties. I’m less ambivalent about attempts to govern the city technologically, not least because this is the true history of knowing and regulating the modern city. I do not find the writing on smart or sentient cities as offensive as do humanist commentators on the city.

There is, of course, an expensive whacky end. I am not convinced by experiments to create new cities such as Masdar City in Abu Dhabi or Songdo in South Korea, replete with sensors in every part of the built environment—visible and hidden—in order to enable smart management on the basis of comprehensive monitoring of people, energy, traffic, electrons, waste and the like. If this is the sustainable or self-monitoring city, it is also the city of hyper-surveillance, technological vulnerability, coordination nightmares and human disempowerment. This said, I am also convinced that the modern city is not made or regulated by conscious, willing, reasoning humans, but by their associations with nonhumans in the form of buildings, infrastructures, technologies, things, symbols, atmospheres, ecologies and more. Your own work shows powerfully how the urban ecology works in this way. You could say that we humans, in cities all over the world and not just the technologically sophisticated ones—as we see from the work of Achille Mbembe, Filip de Boeck, AbdouMaliq Simone and Ravi Sundaram—are interpolated by this urban technological unconscious, as Nigel Thrift describes it. We are defined by it, we think and act through it, we rely on it in every sense, and we are part of it. Our reasoning and our affective orientations are formed through this urban unconscious, and its own smartness and agency. In this sense, the everyday life of technology cannot be ignored.

> **“**
>
> **I’m ambivalent about the premise that contemporary urban life can be mastered through large data sets. So my concern is methodological, concerning the limitations of numerical data, analytical technologies, and interpretative certainties**
>
> **”**

MG: One of the key concepts

Matthew Gandy

emerging in your recent writing is the term “infrastructure”. It’s a complex term and it remains somewhat under-explored within geography. What does infrastructure mean for you?

AA: Well, for a start it means the most obvious: the amalgam of systems that make up the urban built environment and its supplies, from transport and communications, to housing, energy, water and welfare services. But it means a lot more than this. I am interested in the agency of the material that makes and fixes the urban commons as the patterned ground on which urban life forms and evolves. I want to use the term to think and imagine the city in a completely different way, in the way Bruno Latour did in his book on Paris (*Paris ville invisible*, 1998), in which no human is to be seen, or, for that matter, human will and intent. You could almost argue that the urban as an ecology could be grasped as an infrastructural assemblage, composed of a whole array of instituted returns that, whether efficient or dysfunctional, guide the city behind our backs: the architecture of urban hardware and software, the machinery of urban order and orientation, the rules of organisation and mobility, the coursing of metabolic systems, and indeed the very atmosphere that we breathe as climates become naturalised in odd ways in the urban environments. Then, to borrow Peter Sloterdijk’s phrase, we can think of the urban infrastructure as part of the atmosphere of place, making the bubble of collective being, and therefore to be read in its detail in any attempt to redefine the human and human wellbeing in the city.

MG: In your paper ‘Surviving the Turbulent Future’ (Society and Space, 2013, Vol.13), where you go into some detail about the question of infrastructure, you introduce an interesting expression, “the collective unglamorous”. Can you explain how this works in relation to your conception of infrastructure?

AA: Well, the collective unglamorous is precisely the silent or hidden unconscious that I have been describing in my extended definition of urban infrastructure, but it also includes the marginal spaces that you write about, which brim with life, if only we looked: those neglected parks where humans and nonhumans enter into juxtapolitical relations, the site on the edge of the city where nature finds its cohabitants, the cemetery in which diverse subalterns find air to breathe. These spaces, generally ignored or undervalued, emerge as quite rich ecologies in your work, the spaces of hybrid combinations, life pulses, and often happenings that decentre assumed meanings of the city. That’s the collective unglamorous, for me: simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary.

> “
>
> **We find the cosmopolitan everyday, with or without direct engagement between strangers, in any city of the world where different classes and social groups are allowed to mingle freely, and where the biopolitics–local and national–of community are less centred on the marked body**
>
> ”

MG: So is the “unglamorous” something that lies essentially outside of conventional social, political or economic discourse, a term that denotes a certain form of marginality?

AA: Both, but also understood as the undervalued everyday. I want to try to get close to the ground of urban formation. I could have given another example, namely the air that we breathe, always there in the background and fundamental for almost every living being in the city, but noticed only when it begins to choke, when something goes wrong in the atmosphere. The unglamorous consists of all those things in the city that we take very little note of, but which are absolutely essential for our lives and our identities.

MG: You use the term “ecology”, and I wondered whether you are using it simultaneously as a metaphorical trope for thinking about space and all its complexity, but also in a literal sense, because in some of my recent writing I’ve been looking very directly at ecological science and exploring potential connections with cultural geography. When you invoke the term ecology, are you using it in a literal as well as metaphorical sense simultaneously?

AA: I’m certainly using it in a metaphorical sense, to convey a sense of the city as a living, metabolic entity that cannot be reduced to the living beings in it alone, human or natural. But I also want to make it speak literally, through the urban understood as a natural habitat, which of course, in your work and others who reject the nature/culture divide, is never reducible to any pure form sitting comfortably on one side of the divide. Then, what do we do with living technologies in the city? Are the animistic infrastructures full of software, computer systems talking to each other, pulsating virtual environments, sensors that see and sometimes feel, not also part of the city’s living ecology, which exists as an entanglement of diverse species, artefacts and technologies?

MG: Does this link to your interest in vitalist approaches to understanding cities?

AA: Yes, it does, absolutely, and that’s another way of posing the question. When we think of cities as vital systems, what do we recognise? Traditionally we’ve thought of humans and of metabolic systems, but not nature, technology or the dead hand of bureaucracy. Yet, these inputs are part of the urban pulse, lively in their own right, and certainly crucial for life in the city.

MG: In your new book, *Land of Strangers* (2012), there are some very interesting ideas that you’re developing. One very politically significant and important argument that you make is about incivilities of difference in the West maintained by the bio-political machinery. I wonder if you could elaborate on that because part of your argument is about the persistence, or even worsening, of incivility in public life.

AA: What I argue in the book is that majority affects towards the figure of the stranger are shaped by the intersection of three forces, each one as political as the other. *First*, civilities of indifference: in the everyday city of multiple cultures and ethnicities, people in public space tend to rub along, get by, respond to difference without dwelling on the difference of the other. My claim, following the discussion we have just had on the urban ecology, is that affective responses are conditioned by atmospheres of place that are never reducible to interpersonal dynamics within a space. When these atmospheres are conducive, strangers develop a kind of civility of indifference to difference, largely because bodily judgements form part of a broader affective landscape in which a space’s noises, smells, visual and symbolic cues, architectural form, and so on, all come into play. Everyone, in this sense, becomes a stranger, equal in a shared space of multiple affective resonances.

Secondly, however, this vernacular jostles with another vernacular, deeply rooted in the body and across generations, which identifies the stranger-marked minorities in particular–as inferior, out of place, dangerous. This vernacular operates pre-cognitively as a form of visceral antagonism, where sensorial stimuli trigger quick-fire categorizations of the other that are always over-coded racially, suppressing other sentiments and dispositions.

This vernacular of phenotypical judgement takes no hostages and condemns the marked body in the flicker of an eyelid regardless of the many qualifications of shared space, as we saw during apartheid and today in public responses towards the Muslim body.

MG: Which is why you speak of the “marked body”?

AA: Absolutely. When the body, for whatever reason, returns as the marked body, all we find is an incivility of difference, with the judged individuals and groups condemned, without qualification or any possibility of response or revision, as anomalous to that space, city and imagined community.

My argument in the book, *thirdly*, is that the relationship between the two vernaculars–the intensity of one or the other–is regulated by the biopolitical, that is, the machinery of order and control in classic Foucauldian terms. The architecture of discipline that permeates a society at any given time, which defines and maintains an imagined community or the society to be governed for its own integrity and survival, is the fulcrum of public culture, the arbiter of the encounter between strangers in physical and virtual space. Looking at the present, I argue that this is a particularly charged biopolitical moment in the west where racism and xenophobia, roving among Muslims, migrants, asylum seekers and dissidents, have returned as the measure of community and communal security. The result is a politics and public culture of open condemnation of the stranger; a melancholia of yearning among majorities for a pristine fictive past, as Paul Gilroy describes it; a sense of the stranger as impediment to future prosperity and security. Today, the chances of the first vernacular—the cosmopolitan everyday—have been very severely reduced.

MG: You use the expression "cosmopolitan engagement". You've been spending some time in Sweden, working in Sweden, and Swedish examples feature quite prominently in your recent writings. Would you say that there is a greater degree of "cosmopolitan engagement" in Stockholm, for example, than in other cities you are familiar with? Where should we look to find cosmopolitan engagement?

AA: We find the cosmopolitan everyday, with or without direct engagement between strangers, in any city of the world where different classes and social groups are allowed to mingle freely, and where the biopolitics—local and national—of community are less centred on the marked body. This city could be London, Manchester, Bombay, Nairobi or Stockholm. Everything depends, in my view, on the mediations of civilities of indifference by vernaculars of aversion, and by the biopolitical regime. On the ground, most of these cities are very similar, pluriverses of diversity and shared turf, but their everyday cosmopolitanism is infected by the return, not just in Europe but around the world, of a politics of society that takes the body as its prime measure, thus giving full vent to enduring legacies of phenotypical racism. Other universals of societal belonging and togetherness, such as social democracy, pluralism and welfarism, which might temper the furies of bodily aversion, are melting away. The result is sameness in the experience of strangers, with any difference between Stockholm or Bombay mediated by the intensity of body politics and local cultures of integration.

MG: One question I had about welfare inspiring politics, which is one of the terms you introduce here, is that in some of the Scandinavian countries, there is a certain kind of social democratic model that is associated with a relatively homogenous social structure. Consequently we could argue that the particular kind of bio-political welfarist model you describe is historically and geographically specific. I wonder if you could say more about the way Sweden features as a possible alternative model given these particular parameters?

AA: I think Sweden does feature as an alternative model because its still lingering welfare biopolitics is more indifferent to difference than countries fully wedded to a differentialist or neoliberal biopolitics. But with regard to the stranger, Sweden is joining many other European countries in questioning multiculturalism and the idea of the open society. So the outcome for the stranger is contradictory, oscillating between asking immigrants to assimilate to the Swedish way of life, however defined, and offering the full spread of welfare entitlements and other social and political rights available to all Swedes. As Allen Pred argued in his book *Even in Sweden* (2000), for the immigrant the welfarist legacy is at once culturally assimilationist and materially equalising.

MG: I thought your writing on Sweden was interesting because it raised this tension between individualist expectations, or the notion of responsibilities lying with the individual, and a reliance on a wider system of structures, or the role of the state. I think this posed some very important questions about this discourse about rights, responsibilities, and the nature of the modern state. There are, for example, very interesting debates about whether the responsibilities for certain kinds of insurance should lie at a collective or an individual level. So in some countries such as the Netherlands there has been this emphasis on collective forms of insurance and infrastructure provision, rather than more fragmentary or individualised approaches. I think there is a tension in terms of different ways of responding to risk or uncertainty, and in a sense, what we expect the state to do, or what levels of risk the state is expected to underwrite on behalf of society.

> **"Is the "unglamorous" something that lies essentially outside of conventional social, political or economic discourse, a term that denotes a certain form of marginality?"**

AA: What's very clear from the Swedish model, particularly in the field of security, which has come to the centre of national priorities among countries gearing up for a hazardous future due to climate change, economic instability and geopolitical threats, is that Sweden hasn't moved towards the individual-centred model of societal management, or framing of the future as catastrophic, in the way that neoliberal states have.

MG: A difference emerges between a welfarist and a catastrophist politics of security as you outline in *Land of Strangers* and in your paper for *Society and Space*, 'Surviving the Turbulent Future'.

AA: Exactly. The catastrophist optic, in neoliberal societies, envisions a future governed by a hyper-vigilantist state that in Rumsfeld fashion throws itself into the fray of threat-making, especially in matters of national security, but also expects its citizens to become managers of their own risks as well as active citizens during an emergency, this as it goes about privatising everything in sight and stripping back unused capacity. That is how the now fashionable term "resilience" is interpreted. In contrast, relatively well-off social democratic societies such as Sweden, by a thread still welfarist, assume that as times become more and more turbulent and uncertain, the state has to assume more responsibilities, and not necessarily in a warlike manner, by seeking to minimise risks, preserve universal insurance schemes, protect communities, improve emergency management mechanisms and build infrastructural resilience and capacity. In Sweden, not least because citizens pay high taxes, the social contract between a providing centre and a receiving society endures, above all during an emergency or in matters in general regarding national security (economic, social, military, climatic), expecting the state and other delegated institutions to act on behalf of the citizen.

MG: So in the Swedish case, do you think the model is relatively robust, because there's now a centre-right coalition government under Fredrik Reinfeldt? Do you get a sense that the model can withstand shifts and changes of that kind, or is the social democratic model in a broader sense under strain?

AA: On matters of national security, the model remains intact, and in fact the government is concerned that a decade or more of privatisation of many essential services, has resulted in reduced maintenance and repair, spare capacity and investment as companies chase profits and minimise costs. It is seeking to improve resilience by prevention and adequate emergency provision, by expecting the private sector to do more, and by seeking to tighten regulatory controls. On matters of culture, or how risks are framed, Sweden—perhaps less so than Denmark—is beginning to fret about multiculturalism, immigration, integration, whether immigrants should behave like Swedes, and what this actually means. So, there is some anxiety about who is to be included in the social contract and on what terms, linked in turn to questions of national wellbeing, but the country

“

These utopian imaginaries need not trace the precise shape of the house on the hill, but rather commit to a politics of hope and inclusion, democratic audit of matters of public concern, and genuine battle over possible models of the good life, rather than leaving the future to soothsayers and warring elites

”

is still, I think, holding back from the racialised politics of everything as we see elsewhere.

MG: Thinking about contemporary Europe, particularly Western Europe, one of the contentious contemporary issues seems to be this onslaught against the public sector. In the last 30 years we saw the radical decline of the industrial working class. Maybe over the next 10 or 20 years we will see the disappearance of public sector workers as a clearly defined social group as part of this tension between either a race to the bottom, the low-pay low skill scenario, or the high skill option which would require massive investment in infrastructure, education, science and training. But where will this money come from if perhaps a third or more of GDP is effectively squirreled away in offshore tax havens and similar types of jurisdictions. How can we have strong enough political institutions to ensure that capital is actually invested productively?

AA: Even during the Thatcher/Reagan era there was heated debate on the difference between high value added and high tax supply economy, and a low cost and low wage service-based non-manufacturing economy. This discussion on pathways to prosperity and wellbeing has endured in different forms. Even then, critics of the neoliberal option talked about the threat of capital flight, the end of the public sector, low wage competition from overseas, the end of manufacturing, and the race to the bottom. Britain and the United States led the way in this race, and the freshness with which problems are spoken off when things go wrong, as they are now, in these defunct economies, continues to bemuse me. Wasn’t the writing on the wall in the 1970s? With everything squandered, it becomes hard to imagine a new institutional settlement. Countries like Sweden and Germany, which didn’t go down the neoliberal route, or at least not fully, continued to invest in the staples of the high value added and high tax economy, in state intervention, in keeping finance tied to the real economy, in growing globally competitive firms that would retain a home base, in training, research and education, and in maintaining a mixed export bag of manufacturers and services. With India, China and other emerging economies colonising the supply-side conditions that the neoliberal economies so desperately wanted to perfect, the only course open to Europe is to develop its high wage, high value added competitive base, which will provide increasing returns to base, but for some countries it is too late for they have washed the legacy away, and for others, the time before the emerging economies master this type of economy is short indeed.

MG: But if there is still time then presumably infrastructure can play a pivotal role?

AA: That is a very good point, because one big difference between then and now, between 30 years ago and today, is that in some countries like the extensively privatised and under-regulated United Kingdom, the infrastructure, is shot to pieces.

MG: In global terms the UK lags way behind many countries such as South Korea, which now has one of the fastest most integrated broadband infrastructure networks in the world.

AA: Add to this educational qualifications, and both private and public sector research and development. The upshot is that in the next decade or so, if markets remain open, Europe will split into two lanes: a crowded one containing Southern and Eastern Europe as well as the likes of the UK, reeling from international competition, and a very narrow fast lane with less than a handful of northern European countries, also facing steep competition, and keen to secede from obligations towards their poorer cousins. In this context, to witness a declaration of UK independence from the European Union–as the Conservatives would have–is either madness itself or a moment of rare insight anticipating the disdain of the fast economies. This map, incidentally, will be replicated across the European urban landscape, if we accept that the drivers of the economy are cities.

MG: I wanted to link the argument about infrastructure back to urban ecology. A key dilemma is how cities will respond to environmental change and the tension between resilience and adaptation. Will cities embark on a new generation of techno-managerial responses or seek to explore ecologically orientated alternatives?

AA: At Cambridge I teach a third-year course called “Changing Cultures of Risk”, in which we cover risks ranging from terrorism and warfare to technological hazards and climate changing. So, yes, I am thinking about these issues. And your questions are neatly captured by the television documentary *Earth 2100* (2009), which looks back to the US from that date, following global inaction to respond to global warming in our times. It is a chilling documentary, narrated by a New Yorker who ages in animated form over the century, telling the tale of the collapse of the US as a federal entity once the devastations of climate change start to bite across the country after the failure of international talks to cut back on emissions. Government breaks down, the West Coast suffers from immense energy failures because it failed to invest in appropriate infrastructures, Middle America collapses into a state of feral warfare because it’s dry and other states refuse to provide water and other staples, and the East Coast, more specifically New York, manages to hang in for a few decades. With the nation and its structures gone, the local becomes crucial for survival, which brings us to your question. According to the documentary, New York, with a still intact authority, was already beginning to prepare for climate change by 2015, investing in a gigantic tidal barrier, smart and green buildings, local food, alternative energy and an active green citizenry. Around mid-century, the experiment is beginning to work, with New York just about managing to keep abreast of the challenges of climate change through a mixture of large and small technological solutions and major lifestyle changes. But, the story ends badly. When the big flood comes, the tidal barrier fails and New York is submerged. There is total infrastructural and governmental failure, and the learning that had gone on in the preceding decades to cope with climate disaster on a slow fuse is undone. The capabilities that had been maturing in the urban unconscious abruptly disappear, and with it, the possibility of civilisation on the edge of disaster. New York is reduced, like elsewhere, to a state of warfare and feral existence. The neighbourhood communities, which grew their own food, traded with each other, with or without money, collapse. Our aged protagonist wanders off into the wilderness. The documentary speaks volumes about the interdependencies of foresight, planning, technology, expertise, social inventiveness and solidarity, but also their extremely precarious status.

MG: It sounds like a neo-Hobbesian vision of the future.

AA: It is very much a neo-Hobbesian vision of the future, but one that ends up there because of failed large-scale engineering of wellbeing demanded by the enormity of the hazards and risks we face, through responsible states, big technologies and binding international conventions. Communitarian response depended upon the latter. Less than two weeks after I showed the documentary, New York got badly flooded during by Hurricane Sandy.

MG: Paradoxically that had a political impact of showing why government is important and what it can actually do just before the US presidential election.

AA: Yes, the event was narrated, rightly, around the swiftness of response from Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the municipal authorities of New York, the infrastructures that held up and the technologies that could be mobilised, and–contra New Orleans–the response of the Federal State.

MG: Yes, and the Republican Party governor of New Jersey, Christopher Christie, effectively coming out in support of Obama.

AA: So, the triangle of climate change mitigation is the triangle of active government, technology and community.

MG: Thinking about future scenarios one thing that interests me is this tension because utopian and dystopian scenarios. The novelist JG Ballard, who also writes about infrastructural failure, has been critiqued by neo-Marxian scholars such as Frederic Jameson, for foreclosing the possibility to imagine a better world. In your book with Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political* (2013), you try to imagine different possible worlds. Could say something about this tension between utopian and dystopian conceptions of the future?

AA: We’re living amidst a surfeit of dystopian visions of the future, which are achieving anything but a democratic call to arms for the more equal and just society. That’s interesting in its own right, perhaps good reason to revive utopian imaginaries of the future. We argue in our book that these utopian imaginaries need not trace the precise shape of the house on the hill, but rather commit to a politics of hope and inclusion, democratic audit of matters of public concern, and genuine battle over possible models of the good life, rather than leaving the future to soothsayers and warring elites. It is to the utopia of making things visible, democratic practice and projection from the problems of today that we turn, to the imperative of always revisiting the scope and the aim of political struggle as circumstances evolve.

In this diagram, structures of feeling–and their engineering–play a central role. A new left project for a just and equal world can design, plan and reason as much as it wants, but without affective interest in what it has to offer, without working the unreason that guides human life, without breaking the monopoly of suspicion, aversion, competitiveness and individualism that neoliberalism/conservatism depends upon, it will fall on deaf eras. Revolutionary and reform movements that have succeeded in touching hearts and minds found a way of tapping into, sometimes inculcating, a new ethical and affective landscape, inventing arts and technologies of the political, from pamphlets to music and public meetings, that helped to mobilise yearning for a different kind of world. It is when fairness, solidarity, care, revulsion against oppression and exploitation, curiosity for the other, pluralism and the desire for a balanced and measured life become widely felt that the prospect of another world become thinkable. This requires work, not vanguard subjects and vanguard visions.

MG: But there is also the danger that we spoke about earlier, the rise of xenophobia and a kind of reactionary insurgency. Why should it necessarily be a progressive shift that comes out of the current uncertainty?

AA: That is precisely my point. The current uncertainty is producing only a reactionary surge because there is no credible and felt imaginary of the future, such that the alternative affective surges that we find in the likes of the occupy movement, youth protests against injustice and marginalisation, the Arab Spring, the world's dispossessed communities and demands for sustainable environments are treated by elites and publics alike as illegitimate, an aberration, out of this world. Yet, they are central to the fair society, the environment treated with care.

MG: If you look at debates within social theory, figures such Jürgen Habermas have been very cautious about endorsing environmental politics, for various historical and cultural reasons. How do we develop a new kind of environmentally informed progressive politics that doesn't lapse into some of the more reactionary or neo-Malthusian strands that we saw in the late 1960s or early 1970s, because in terms of popular scientific and political discourses the same types of arguments are repeatedly made along with the same failures in developing new political understandings or strategies. So how would you conceive of a different kind of environmental politics that might speak to some of those themes you mentioned?

AA: In *Arts of the Political*, we speak of a politics of matters of common concern, following Latour, and we argue that such a politics–powered up to take in many rather than few struggles–can become cosmological, literally and metaphorically: about the earth and beyond, and around a plenitude of concerns. So, Latour, and indeed also Isabelle Stengers, now define cosmopolitics as a politics of the cosmos, in which the earth and its state becomes a central concern, the reference point of all politics. In this way, all politics takes nature as its starting point, or more accurately culture/nature, referenced against degrees of injury to the environment. This is quite a challenge, but one that could be enacted with the right kinds of structures of feeling and habits of modest living in place, along with technologies able to sense the degree of damage done to the environment by practices in any walk of life, from walking to consuming, from producing to commuting. So, there's a certain kind of biopolitics of environmental disciplining that kicks in as part of the everyday regulatory framework of provisioning, eventually, affecting all kinds of behaviour and political decision.

MG: For me one of the questions here would be how we get fields such as architecture, engineering and critical urbanism to interact as a kind of cross-disciplinary set of intellectual practices? How do we get these different elements to engage in a sustained, systematic and cogent way? Much architectural discourse is very unsatisfactory in terms of its superficial grasp of political or even scientific questions, and metaphors are strewn around almost randomly. Then you have engineers who bring their own particular way of looking at space, but often remain trapped within a certain model of infrastructural thinking that is quite resistant to opening up to other discourses. How do we get a kind of genuinely interdisciplinary approach to both professional practice and academic research? The mantra today is that different disciplines must speak to each other or work with each other, but it is extremely difficult to do that in practice.

AA: You have hit the nail on the head: these are the critical problems of inter-discipline. There is an interesting development in the world of research councils, which are moving towards funding large interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary projects. That's a positive move, but one that you've got to make work, because very often, the teams of specialists from different backgrounds end up talking past each other or agreeing on the lowest common denominator.

MG: Or they become effectively less than the sum of their parts.

AA: Holistic thinking needs to become a primary mode of thought and practice, a kind of new science and art, girded by much tighter scrutiny from the funding bodies of the division of labour in large projects (avoiding disciplinary divisions alone), building in considerable time and resource for new forms of learning among collaborators, and evaluation criteria that put experimentation and inter-discipline at the heart of assessing success. And the same goes for professional practice where we have similar problems, compounded by the obduracy of disciplinary professional legacies and institutions. Although the world of practice is much less conservative than the world of academic research, with its increasing orientation to themes and projects, a set of high profile urban projects trying to design the city in radically new ways could make a considerable difference by signalling the necessity and viability of, let us say, a 'mode of existence' approach, rather than one determined to show off the latest innovation in architecture, engineering or urban art. You could say that urban counter-measures of the past, such as experiments with garden cities or Quaker utopias for industrial workers, were such projects: they looked for technical solutions that would enable the realisation of a particular mode of urban existence and wellbeing. I think today's city makers have lost this sense of design, which requires bringing many actors into the fray.

MG: In terms of the specific question about how to build linkages between academic work and professional practice, and actually generate new models and new ways to do things, one thing that I'm very concerned about is the way in which universities have become more fragile in terms of their capacity to undertake autonomous work, for a range of reasons. In the UK, the councils that fund research are almost desperate to prove their worth to political administrations, or they inculcate certain narrow values that we all know about. This development is antithetical to generating really path-breaking work. It is an irony that some private research foundations such as the Leverhulme Trust or the Graham Foundation are happy to simply disburse money to interesting projects or ideas. They don't try to predetermine agendas and outcomes.

AA: I couldn't agree with you more. Trend-setting corporations have always organised research and development differently, avoiding fast, linear and segmented research practice in their 'foresight' units. Today, we find this legacy embraced by IT corporations, which believe strongly in bringing together experts from across the professional spectrum, allowing them to produce new knowledge recursively and interactively, and effectively giving them a set of toys to play with in order to fashion new worlds, with copious amounts of time, resource and trust. Equally, and Germany is a good example, independent research foundations have long pursued a similar philosophy, giving space to researchers to work away for months and years on an idea, confident that serendipity, trial and error, organised dialogue or the slow burn of sustained thinking will produce genuine novelty. The situation in countries like the UK, especially in the social sciences and humanities, is exactly as you describe: prescriptive, linear, short-term, impact-obsessed and utilitarian. Inter-discipline is defined by this kind of indiscipline.

MG: That's right, the sort of autonomous spaces within which really interesting work can be produced are disappearing. My worry is that we are producing a culture of intellectual mediocrity because of the many restrictions now placed on longer-term imaginative work or complex thinking with uncertain outcomes.

AA: We can agree on that ✱