

Book reviews

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Gautam Bhan, *In the Public's Interest: Evictions, Citizenship and Inequality in Contemporary Delhi*, Orient Blackswan: New Delhi, 2016; 304 pp.: ISBN: 978-81-250-6232-5, Rupees 825 (hbk) [South Asia only]; University of Georgia Press: Athens, 2016; 256 pp.: ISBN: 978-0-8203-5010-3, US\$29.95 (pbk) [Rest of World].

Reviewed by: Vanessa Watson, School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Bhan's book tells the story of the 'basti' (informal settlement) evictions in Delhi, India. What is significant about this narrative is Bhan's insistence that these sites of eviction allow an understanding of the dynamics of contemporary urbanism not just in Delhi but also across urban peripheries more generally, in other words in global South cities as well as in peripheries of cities in both the North and South. In doing so he aligns his work with those urban and planning theorists who are attempting to unsettle the meta-narratives of urban theory told from the global North, theorists who are challenging the place-less universalism of previously dominant urban theorising as well as the current resurgent attempt to stamp a single analytical framework on all cities of the world. In challenging, with others, the argument by the likes of Merrifield (2014) that cities across the world only differ by degree and not substance, and Scott and Storper's (2014) proposal to view all cities through the dynamics of agglomeration and

the unfolding of an associated nexus of locations, land uses and human interactions, Bhan argues that a more accurate and appropriate theorising needs to be built up from 'place' and context. Here Bhan, as with many other contemporary southern theorists, is not referring to 'place' as physical location (the geography of the global South or 'developing' countries) but rather as a 'relational geography' or as a perspective (*from* the South). Hence when he uses the lens of the 'basti' evictions, it is not just to study Delhi but also to surface a set of questions which challenge our understanding of cities everywhere. To take this important distinction a step further, his purpose (and that of southern urban theorists such as Ananya Roy and Abdoumalik Simone) is not simply to add empirical diversity through the study of global South cities as interesting and different cases (Roy, 2008) but to build new theory (inductively) through the insights which very different cities (and not just those of the global North) can offer.

So what do the 'basti' of Delhi (which could also be read as the favela, the campamento, the slum) have to say to wider urban theorising? Significantly, Bhan has chosen to focus on 'basti' *evictions*, a process which has gathered pace in Delhi and other large cities of the South, as the economic value of urban land rises and a 'middle-class' urban aesthetic takes hold – an '... elite insurgent urban citizenship that produces and claims the city ...' (p. 152) and which has displaced the urban poor from both urban land and

the developmental imagination. The 'basti' evictions, Bhan argues, are a critical site through which to understand the dynamics of urbanism as they allow the tracing of processes of impoverishment, in other words the actions of the state which create poverty. It is a process through which decades of slow incremental development and a winning of small struggles (to remain on land, to receive basic services) are erased, sometimes in weeks, setting people adrift into ever more precarious livelihoods and substantially eroding even minor claims to urban rights and citizenship.

Telling the stories of these evictions allows a contribution to some important urban issues and themes. A key one is the growing role of the courts in urban planning, how concepts of urban 'illegality' are being reshaped, and more broadly the changing relationship of law and urbanism. Building on the assertion of Comaroff and Comaroff (2008) that across the postcolonial world politics is increasingly constituted in and as law (the judicialisation of politics) Bhan shows how in the last two decades the judiciary has emerged as a critical site in shaping almost every facet of Delhi's urbanism. Using the argument that government and planners are failing to plan, are putting the development of the city at risk and are threatening 'law and order', the courts claim the right to act 'in the public interest' and as an act of governance. This declaration of state 'failure' allows the courts to position themselves as a new and powerful urban actor, but with an approach to planning and its implementation that is very different from traditional state planning processes. Declaring the 1962, 2001 and 2021 Delhi master plans as 'legal documents' rather than as policies and tools for negotiation (their role in state planning processes) the courts have been able to move swiftly to identify those 'basti' which do not meet the land-use categorisations of the plans, and to order their removal.

Tracking the actions of the courts in eviction processes also allows Bhan to speak back to a longer debate about urban informality/illegality, and to the more recent proposition from Roy (2005) of the informal as a phenomenon produced by the state and by planning. Positioning planning as a technique of rule and a mode of spatial governance used to decide what is legal and what is not, and in a situation in which (in 2000) only 24% of Delhi's population lived in what the master plan called 'planned colonies', Bhan asks: how is it decided which settlements must be removed? But further, and given that the state is not a homogenous entity, which institutions within the state are making such decisions, and in conflict with what other institutions? This question turns attention to the 'work done' by the idea and discourse of 'failure' as the courts assert their power and move to justify and implement their decisions to evict. Opening up the much wider theorisation of urban informality to these kinds of questions is a good example of the way in which Bhan uses the 'basti' not just to interrogate urban transformations in Delhi but to theorise from the place of Delhi to the wider southern theorising project.

There are further and related questions which the 'basti' evictions of Delhi generate for wider theoretical debates, and Bhan devotes sections of the book to each of these. Following a chapter on urban informality/illegality, he opens up a set of debates on 'good governance' read through their rationalities, modes and intersections with ideas of planned development in rapidly transforming cities: in particular, how have the courts used the discourse of 'good governance' and the 'public interest' to address what they argue is a failure of the state to plan? How can the changing nature and understandings of citizenship be explained through the 'basti' evictions? Here Bhan questions how an ordinary land-use plan can come to mark a spatial, aesthetic, social

and political order which, according to the courts, must be attained, in turn impacting both governance and the rights of citizens. How does the new naming by the courts of 'basti' dwellers as 'encroachers' – the antithesis of citizens – create an identity for them which no longer recognises their eligibility for rights? How do these new positionings of the state and the courts have an effect on resistance and the ability of subaltern residents to struggle against processes of exclusion? When do communities decide to resist or not resist and what strategies do they use to do this? These processes come together to explain what Bhan calls the 'impoverishment' of urban residents (a more active word, he says, than poverty, and one which draws attention to the ways in which poverty is actively created and maintained) and hence the importance of examining the relationship between democracy and inequality in any city.

This masterful book by Bhan not only opens up a range of new questions for critical urban theorists, it also offers a method of inquiry which begins with a case, embedded in a context, in 'place', and uses this as a lens to suggest perspectives on cities elsewhere. This is just one step in a process of building southern urban theorising: the insights do not take the form of a generalised model or concept applicable anywhere, rather they raise issues and questions which can be tested elsewhere and refuted, supported or elaborated. This will be a book of considerable value to urban and planning researchers, academics and students and particularly those interested in global South cities and critical urban theory. It is written in a highly accessible form drawing on ethnographic work as well as current urban theory.

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- Max Hirsh, *Airport Urbanism: Infrastructure and Mobility in Asia*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2016; 216 pp.: ISBN: 978-0-8166-9610-9, US\$25.00 (pbk)
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The photograph of the bright, spacious and orderly airport terminal that fills both covers of the book may suggest that the focus of *Airport Urbanism: Infrastructure and Mobility in Asia* is the string of new and spectacular airport facilities that have accompanied the unprecedented urbanisation rates in Asia over the last two decades. Although the author does discuss some of these projects, his concern is a rather opposite phenomenon: the appearance of a transnational low-cost and largely informal transport system that struggles to keep pace with the exponential rise in air travel in Asia. Significantly, this increase mainly responds to the emergence of what he calls the *nouveaux globalisés*: a new and variegated flying public, composed amongst others of migrant workers, budget tourists and expatriate retirees, whose movement has been facilitated by a reduction of restrictions on transnational mobility and the growth of low-cost airlines. In this respect, the book not only presents a valuable and in-depth