

Beyond a Standardised Urban Lexicon: Which Vocabulary Matters?

Abstract

Urban vocabulary has been influenced by global patterns of modernity, capitalism and Anglophone academia. These lexicons are increasingly standardised and shape dominant conceptual approaches in city debates. However, contemporary urban theories indicate a shift toward understanding the ‘urban’ and ‘cities’ from multiple perspectives. An emerging urban vocabulary is being built to capture the significance of place, complex power dynamics, and changing geographical landscapes. This special issue presents diverse perspectives on how urban lexicons can be decentred from anglophone thought, operate as organising urban logics, serve larger political projects, and shape and are reshaped by grounded urban practice. Articles from the Middle East and South Asia discuss the margins of vocabulary and how vocabularies located in the Global South enable us to think through dilemmas of knowledge production. We contribute to debates on decolonising power and authority in urban thought by expanding on how to theorise from the South.

Keywords: Urban vocabularies, Southern Urbanism, Global South, Middle East, South Asia

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Beyond a Standardised Urban Lexicon: Which Vocabulary Matters?

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Introduction

Urban vocabularies located and grounded in the Global South are useful to understand visible and invisible processes of city-making. They provide a roadmap of what a city was, is and what is hoped to be; and how citizens and other stakeholders make sense of the urban condition (Bhan,2019). Vocabularies have been defined as concepts that generate different types of knowledge acquired through academic discourse and everyday articulations of the rapidly changing city (Barua and Jellis 2018). An important question, then, is, how do we build and expand on urban vocabularies beyond the binaries of universal and localized meanings. Most discussions in urban studies today have been based on interjections of modernity, advances of capitalism and always recycled within a Euro-American context. Debates surrounding the use of the word ‘slum’, ‘smart cities’, ‘urban poor’, ‘legal’, ‘illegal’, ‘formal’, ‘informal’, ‘periphery’ and others are especially indicative of the power imbalances inherent in the choice of vocabulary to describe urban processes (Roy, 2009;Arabindoo, 2011; Datta, 2012). Within this literature, the framing of a standardized urban lexicon has been questioned since it dictates specific dominant contours that shape today’s urban debates.

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However, contemporary urban theories, from Global Cities, World Class Cities, Planetary Urbanisation to Ordinary Cities, Comparative Urbanism and Southern Urbanism; indicate a shift in understanding the ‘urban’ and ‘cities’ from multiple perspectives. These theoretical and epistemological shifts have also required the expansion of an urban vocabulary that is capable of capturing the significance of place, complex power dynamics, and changing geographical landscapes. Yet, how we read today’s cities and where we place them in an emerging global lexicon is increasingly contested (Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). Even basic questions, such as the meaning of ‘the urban’, boundaries of country and city, the contours of democratic and inclusive governance, and the uneven transformation of cities among others, are all open to reinterpretation (Brenner,2014;Scott and Storper, 2016).

In many cases, vocabulary has been used as a starting point for the conceptual investigation of layered urban phenomena in Southern cities. We understand urban vocabularies as ongoing practices of knowledge production that are socio-politically rooted in the margins of the everyday and articulated via shared meanings and languages. These terminologies are dynamic in nature as the usage and meanings of the words change at particular historical junctures (Bhan, 2019). In spite of a wide range of lexicons which have been used to theorise the urban, we still find a lacuna to incorporate all the practices and processes that transform our cities. We follow Bhan’s (2019) call to incrementally build vocabularies that allow more possibilities to generate and imagine theories and practices of the urban.

This special issue will outline the debates emerging from a homogenized urban lexicon and reflect on the potential for collective deliberation in the production of knowledge in urban studies. We argue for the need to engage in reflexive practices concerning vocabularies in order to capture grounded experiences of people, places, practices, and regions. This engagement

matters because the contexts of the lexicon are not static and are instead encountered through grounded realities. We insist that, as part of an inclusive and decolonised urban studies agenda, the vocabulary ‘on’ and ‘from’ the South should challenge selective and restricted Anglophone theorisation of the urban.

The papers presented in this special issue speak to these issues primarily from South Asia (India) and the Middle East (Turkey), and seek to engage with multiple layers of meanings and trajectories from the South. By developing case studies using ethnographies, archives and aesthetics, we question how the urban is made and unmade through dialogues between the state, communities, transnational actors and the global academe. In an attempt to locate Southern epistememes through urban practice (Bhan 2019), this issue provides insights into how idioms grounded in a particular place and time carry deeper meanings of urban renewal that are crucial to reevaluating blanket characterisations of urban conditions in the South. In the following sections, we first map where we are locating urban vocabularies, followed by an interrogation of some of the terms examined in participating papers, and end with a reflection on why vocabularies matter to the larger urban studies agenda.

Locating Urban Vocabularies

One of the tenets of decolonising urban study and practice entails the relocation of knowledge production to the South. Urban studies debates regard the Global South as the ‘new epicentre of urbanism’ (Parnell and Oldfield 2014). However, the question of ‘where’ we build vocabulary is not delineated only within territorial boundaries and place-based understandings, but in/with conversations from multiple locations, and collective understandings of reading and experiencing the city. In this sense, vocabularies, just like the Global South, are not just representative of a geographical expression (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012), but are elements within a relational

theory (Roy, 2016), and a conceptual category (Mabin, 2014) mired with tensions. A southern vocabulary would thus draw upon the heterogeneous experiences of different cities and their radical assemblages as a way to counter the universalisation and standardisation of lexicons. As scholars attempt to theorise from the South, there is a noticeable gap in addressing the unequal usage of urban vocabularies and their inherent hierarchies in theory and practice (Robinson, 2016). Dominating vocabularies have helped to invisibilise the complexities of knowledge production and inclusion, and it is only with these new conceptual approaches that a Southern vocabulary could expand and continually transform as new grounded realities emerge, which will be discussed in the following section.

Interrogating the 'where' of vocabularies entails an inquiry that goes beyond understanding lexicon as static, and grounded in a particular geographical location; but instead begins to trace ongoing conversations and practices across place and time. In academia, the emerging debate on adopting new urban vocabulary highlights the dilemma of knowledge production on and from the Global South (Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). Many scholars have called for the inclusion of Southern scholars based in local institutions, and many edited volumes now carry a host of names enumerating case studies from the South (Parnell and Oldfield 2014; Bhan et al, 2019). However, we rarely discuss how this inclusion takes place and recognize what systemic barriers operate to exclude, such as the use of language. The 'means' of academic knowledge still remains confined to certain research groups, global conferences and mainstream journals that use a specific academic or technical lexicon. Consequently, for those not trained in this anglophone academic tongue, the chances of knowledge transfer are much reduced.

In order to experiment with learning and producing on/from the south, we have engaged in several reflective practices that were instrumental in how we have come to view the production

of knowledge. We co-convened a student-led international conference- ‘Urbanism in the Global South: New Geographies of Development’ at the University of Cambridge in June 2017. This conference was followed by the establishment of a collaborative working group on Urbanism in the Global South that aimed for cross-disciplinary urban conversations. We continued some of these ongoing engagements and formulated a RGS panel on ‘Beyond a Standardised Urban Lexicon: Which Vocabulary Matters?’ in 2018. These conferences, working group meetings, and RGS panels were spaces for collective deliberation and radical debate on the variety of practices of adopting, rebuilding vocabularies from the margins. Two main dilemmas emerged from this experience, the first concerning power and positionality; and the second focused on the analytical parameters of knowledge production.

In the first instance, our own roles as convenors, having lived and worked in the Global South and received academic training in the Global North helped us recognize the gaps between the vocabulary of theory and practice of twenty-first century cities. As researchers working towards decolonising mainstream theories and deconstructing practices through in-situ fieldwork, it became clear that the subtle realities of the South are yet to ‘melt into the air flows’ of scholarship. While on the one hand, we were deconstructing these practices as outsiders, on the other, we acknowledged our epistemic privilege and power as insiders in a global knowledge producing epicentre like the University of Cambridge.

During the course of these discussions, it was also imperative to reflect on questions of representation - who formulates vocabularies on/from the Global South? Sophia Oldfield and Sue Parnell have argued, “in framing our search for chapters, we were especially anxious to speak to a new generation of urbanists, who may not necessarily live in cities of the south, but

will be much more conscious of and engaged with cities in the south than past generation of either academics or professionals” (2016, 2). By engaging in conversations through grounded case studies in working groups, conferences, and workshops, we aimed to deconstruct and address the gaps especially for scholars outside Anglophone academia.

Second, we also became conscious of several discussions on what counts as scholarship and what is left out because of barriers to entry, such as mainstream epistemic and academic writing criteria (IIHS, 2016). We came to realise that discussions on the quality of an urban lexicon flowing from the South were one of the barriers to knowledge-making. For instance, while selecting and finalizing contributions to the 2017 Global South conference, themes for the working group, and RGS panels, it was imperative to discuss and unlearn some of the mainstream practices of knowledge building. We challenged processes of academic inquiry, and decided to pay attention to individual cities, experiences, concepts, and words from the grounded case studies. Our prior understanding of the sense of place and regional academic training helped us broaden the intake and to make allowances for what would be counted as ‘incorrect terminologies’, and locally used phrases that engage with grounded practices and contexts. We see this approach to southern vocabularies as finding and accommodating languages for everyday experiences and emerging forms of the urban which are not necessarily standardised, through ongoing and sustained conversations.

Building Urban Vocabularies

Vocabularies as Organising Urban Logics

This special issue responds to the call of accommodating different conceptual and practical vocabularies of urban conditions in cities of the South (Bhan, 2019). In this issue, articles from

the Middle East (Turkey) and South Asia (India) discuss how vocabularies located and relocated to the Global South serve as a starting point to think through dilemmas of knowledge production on and from non-Western contexts. In particular, the papers presented here tackle first, how universal vocabularies impact how we organise everyday urbanism and marginalisation, and second, the political potency of vocabularies that expand beyond their technocratic use in urban planning. Taken together, these contributions present a reflective engagement with what it means to ‘think’ from the South using grounded case studies.

Ideas, theories and vocabularies have always travelled. In a 1983 article, Edward Said put forward the idea of ‘travelling theory’ as he engaged with ideas of space and place in literature. He details the process of ideas travelling through space and time, and the importance of recognising how and where ideas land:

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. Having said that, however, one should go on to specify the kinds of movement that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation (1983: 226)

In analysing theories and vocabularies that are applied to new geographies and contexts, we seek to locate their practical impacts, and also their journeys. Said elaborates on the pattern of movement of ideas in four stages: (1) the point of origin and idea creation; (2) the distance transversed and its passage through time and place; (3) conditions for the acceptance or resistance of such ideas; and (4) the final transformation and its new uses spatially and temporally (1983: 226-7). This framework helps us to think through how travelling urban concepts have changed scholarship and practice in destination contexts, and to recognise the blurring of universal and grounded thought in everyday life.

Urban vocabularies have accompanied universalizing theories that seek to explain and conceptually unify the urban condition (Barua and Jellis, 2018). As the contours of urban studies are stretched to include descriptions of cities, urbanisation and everyday life, patterns of thought and practice emerge (Bhan, 2019; Simone, 2018). Urban Vocabularies, in particular, has been used to serve different purposes: to highlight static and dynamic urban conditions, amplify practices that challenge traditional thinking (Bhan, 2019), and locate what remains missing in our urban interpretations (Sharp, 2019). In finding the right words, scholars attempt to transverse the disconnect between theory and practice, the technical and political realms, and the universal and the contextual (Arabindoo, 2011). At the transnational scale, certain concepts have gained more traction than others. For instance, the term 'slum' was used as a blanket term in development practice and scholarship to describe low-income and marginalized neighbourhoods, regardless of their heterogeneous nature (Arabindoo, 2011). Similarly within infrastructure research, splintering urbanism theory was used to understand how neoliberal conditions fragment and divide the institutional and physical landscapes of service provision (Graham & Marvin, 2011). However, scholars working in southern contexts have shown how instead some systems

have always been ‘splintered’ right from their inception due to local factors like colonialism, class divide and uneven material geographies (Kooy, 2014). Similarly, critical urban thinkers have pushed beyond homogenising and stigmatising notions of the ‘slum’ traditionally used by professional urban practice (UNHABITAT, 2003). The imperative to nuance and ground these universal theorisations has emerged as an important step toward unpacking ‘travelling’ theoretical framings and question how they serve certain interests of power and gain temporal value.

In this special issue, Can examines the relationship between several travelling conceptual framings in the case of Turkey. In examining the urban transformation of Istanbul, she unpacks the relationship between territorial stigmatisation, and gentrification through state-led urban renewal strategies. ‘Stigma’ in particular has been used in the context of marginalised communities in Western contexts, especially with the increased attention to exclusionary spaces such as migrant dominant communities, peripheries and urban crime in cities like Chicago and Paris (Wacquant et al., 2014; Dikec, 2002; Kallin and Slater, 2014; Kirkness, 2014; Sakizlioglu and Uitermark, 2014, Sisson, 2020). Can points us to scholarship by sociologist Loic Wacquant, which has been especially useful in defining what territorial stigma means for spatial expansion and marginality (2008), while Dikec has situated how stigmatisation plays a role in the ordering of the city and the upholding of structural conditions of domination (2002). This line of scholarship accounts for what Can examines in the case of Istanbul as the elitist production of space, and the use of ‘stigma’ as an organising urban logic. While people have been traditionally stigmatised due to their status as minorities, their presence in space is also stigmatised as state and capital try to move in. She reminds us, in this instance, that ‘territorial stigma’ can be used to obfuscate poverty and crime, and becomes the central tenet to advancing marginality.

In the same vein, the concept of ‘gentrification’ is also explored in this special issue from two perspectives. While Can explores how the concept has been embraced by Turkish scholarship (Can, 2013; Islam, 2010; Sisson, 2020; Sakizlioglu and Uitermark, 2014), in a second intervention, Das examines how the same concept is rejected by some scholars of India. In the case of Istanbul, the term has been enlarged beyond its original aim to highlight the displacement of the working class for middle-class private property renewal. Instead, similar to scholarship emerging from East Asia mentioned by Das (Ley et al., 2014; Sin, 2016), gentrification here is understood as a state phenomenon in which spatial reconfiguration occurs through state intervention at the behest of capital. This contextual definition of gentrification changes the essence of the concept from its original purpose to describe market-led urban transformations, and instead puts forward a pluriverse of what gentrification can and will become with the addition of multi-actor interventions. Although the class struggle at the centre of urban regeneration projects remains at the core of gentrifying logics, the role of the state valorises new sets of conditions and actors. Can uses the case of the Tarlabasi neighbourhood to illustrate how gentrification analysis is not only limited to class as a dominating site of struggle, but also sees new forms of ethnic differentiation by bringing in geopolitical struggle, historical violence, and gender politics. When the state takes a more central role in displacement, capital hides and also invisibilises some of these forms of difference. It thus takes a longer epistemological engagement to trace these relational dynamics.

At the same time, the case of Turkey also moves beyond these debates to show how urban practices in their material, discursive and conceptual forms work together in the creation of difference, stigma and displacement. As the next section will explore, the political use of terms such as ‘stigma’ and ‘gentrification’ creates afterlives in urban practice and form. For instance,

for Can, the Turkish state advances a rhetoric of safety, crime, and ethnic violence to enlist public opinion in the favour of replacing central dilapidated neighbourhoods with sanitised middle class and elite housing. Pooling expert opinion from the urban professional domain also serves as technical justifications to force residents to leave and make space for capital. It ultimately takes the collective action of these marginalised populations and judicial action to resist these material and discursive frames of territorial stigmatisation.

The use of concepts such as ‘gentrification’ and ‘stigma’ in Istanbul by academic circles and urban practitioners points to the ways in which these vocabularies play a spatial role and also offer a lens to view urban transformation in Southern cities. However, it is clear that some concepts are capable of gaining traction beyond Anglophone theorisations and others do not. What could be some of these contextual conditions that lead to the absorption of travelling concepts with least resistance? Is the answer predicated on the context or the term in question?

Das’s contribution to this special issue directly addresses this epistemological dilemma by analysing how ‘gentrification’ as a concept has been resisted in the Indian context and the consequences of this non-application. As much as the application of a term transplanted into southern contexts is important, its absence is also significant. Gentrification has gained much traction in the UK and US contexts in the face of rising racial and class divides in urban regeneration programs (Smith 2002). This uptake has also been the case in other Southern contexts, such as East and Southeast Asia as Das points out, but the concept missed its landing on the Indian subcontinent, which she addresses as inherent in the conceptualisation of the theory itself. Her contribution develops the beginning of a more inclusive and critical perspective on gentrification.

At its core, scholarship addressing the theoretical and empirical findings of gentrification addresses urban dispossession (Doshi, 2015; Harris, 2008). Coined by the Sociologist Ruth Glass, 'gentrification' developed as the term to describe the displacement of working class neighbourhoods by the aspirational middle class (1964). Its application in the US was particularly marked by class and racial tensions in the rehabilitation of deprived neighbourhoods in world-class cities such as New York. In his work, Neil Smith pushed beyond the understanding of consumer choice as the main driver of this urban change, and instead placed profit motives and the role of the real estate sector at the crux of uneven development (2002). For modern scholars, debates have centred on how far a definition of gentrification can incorporate patterns of urban regeneration and its affiliated displacements (Slater, 2006; Slater and Anderson, 2012). In India, evictions and displacements constitute an overarching urban policy that marks the uneven geographical development of Indian cities. To what extent these changes can be attributed and inscribed in patterns of 'gentrification' becomes a theoretical dilemma for contexts like India.

Das unpacks the non-use of gentrification in Indian academic circles and print media. She details how the vocabulary remains alien due to the lack of a direct translation into 'vernacular speech', but even more so, she contextualises displacement and dispossession as part of the urban renewal of Indian cities. She describes the urbanisation of larger cities as constantly undergoing evictions, such as in 2010, when the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi meant the clearing of JJ clusters or Jhuggi-Jhopris. India's middle-range cities also face these cycles of displacement and regeneration, and, as Ghertner argues, this transformation is driven by state-led development projects, which do not aim for redeveloped property, but instead new swathes of privatised

property (2014). Yet, scholars have argued that to describe these patterns as a representation of gentrification does a disservice to the interpretation of struggles inherent in these transformations (Doshi, 2015; Ghertner, 2014.). However, in abstaining from using this concept to examine the norms of dispossession in Indian cities, it is also important to think through how terms like displacement and eviction invisibilise class-struggle as the core of dispossession.

In an attempt to expand our understanding of traveling concepts, Das advances the heterogeneity of Southern contexts, and the unevenness of concept adoption. She reminds us that,

While it [gentrification] has been used to capture urban regeneration in East Asian and some Southeast Asian countries, it is relatively absent from the urban vocabulary in South Asia. Therefore, the application of the concept is found to be geographically uneven (2020: xx)

We are also reminded that in the case of other Asian contexts, scholars have insisted on the enlargement of the term gentrification to include other factors in the urban renewal process, like the case of Istanbul. For instance, in China, Das indicates that the role of the state has been added as one of the main drivers of gentrification (Shin, 2016). However, we are left with the dilemma of how much to ascribe to the concept in order to universalise its reach, but still remain loyal to qualify urban dispossession in its grounded forms. Das joins other scholars of India in the search for alternative and complementary vocabulary of gentrification that can develop ‘sensitising definitions’ (Doshi, 2015; Ghertner, 2014; Harris, 2008). For India, Das proposes reading

patterns of gentrification alongside frameworks of development-induced development, in order to place both class-struggle and extra-economic factors as drivers of urban dispossession.

Vocabulary as a Political Project

The presented papers in this special issue also point to a second contribution that examines the ways in which vocabularies lie at the center of the politics of urbanisation. In his discussion of ‘travelling theories’, Said turns our attention to how ideas, and for us words, gain new uses and meanings beyond their inherent conceptualisation and original aims (1983). Context, politics, and usage thus play an important role in how words function and are used to shape and be shaped by politics and everyday life. Politics in particular is inherent in our ways of seeing and the adoption of frames of thought that impact policy-making. This is especially clear in the case of urban planning, where the technical and the political remain in tension, making it impossible to disconnect theory and practice from future imaginaries of the city (Bhan, 2019). These reflections help us to recognise the twofold use of vocabularies as not only doing political work, and also functioning on a temporal scale that evokes future imaginations of what cities are ‘supposed to be’ (Simone, 2018). In this section, we seek to develop the ways in which vocabulary is being incrementally built, changed and reused based on the interests of different actors and stakeholders.

Vocabulary provides us with the lens to see the journey of technical solutions and language of professionals and academics into the political realm. While academics are interested in epistemes or why things are done, technocratic language is solution-focused that is based on the standardisation of rules and norms (Lipsky, 1980). Although these approaches may tackle the same urban phenomenon, however, varied understandings and the multiplicity of stakeholders

has muddied meanings of mainstream urban vocabularies. Across the Global South, urban processes were often described by observers building on colonial understandings of space and class, until a new wave of critical social science scholarship attempted to theorise from the margins (Ward, 1976). Nonetheless, observers continue to use an adopted anglophone vocabulary to describe spaces of deprivation in the Global South, such as ‘slum’, which was originally used to describe Victorian districts of deprivation in the UK (Davis, 2004). Its underlying negative connotations were also transferred to these southern sites and their inhabitants. In turn, as international development agencies widened their socio-economic development agendas in the South, they based their framings on these ‘scientific’ findings from the academic community and adopting the same vocabulary.

While urban studies has become infused with critical debates on framings and the production of knowledge, especially with the rise of subaltern studies which locates agency in the South within mainstream theories (Roy, 2011); communities of practice continued with dangerously vague terminology (Gilbert, 2007). For instance, multilateral agencies including United Nations agencies, international financial institutions like the World Bank, and bilateral agencies such as USAID pursued interventions targeting slum improvement using characteristics such as ‘illegality’, and ‘disorder’ to legitimise their programs of resettlement and city ‘worlding’. However, in recent years, the increase in advocacy campaigns, civil society engagement and academic evidence, has led these agencies to accommodate agency, grassroots voices and advocate for ‘slum upgrading’ instead of re-settlement for instance (UNHABITAT, 2003).

Case studies from the Global South critically question how these epistemes are misconstrued and advocate certain ideologies and top-down interventions. Papers presented at our Cambridge

conference challenged mainstream meanings of ‘urban poor’, ‘participation’, ‘smart cities’; as well as the means to theorise from the margins of uneven development and dispossession. The results coalesce with the growing literature on how “universal grammars” (Mbembe in Roy 2016) and terms such as the ‘slum’, ‘world class cities’, and ‘smart’ become the pretext for repressive state interventions (Arabindoo 2011; Roy, 2009; Gilbert, 2007). Just as donors refer to specific expert communities for scientific evidence, states also embrace particular terminologies that coincide with their visions of urban development. Examples across the South demonstrate how state actors have inter-referenced models of urban modernity from places such as Singapore, Shanghai and others (Roy and Ong, 2011), and have used these frames to cleanse their urban palette for a modernised global image.

Similarly, in Oommen and Sequeira’s article, we are confronted with the ways in which states, elites and urban planners embrace and disgrace certain urban interventions. The authors guide us through a discourse analysis of the political and sensorial aesthetics used in the promotion of urban interventions in the case of New Delhi. They take the case of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project, which was at the core of urban debates from 2008-2015. Due to the proven success of the BRT elsewhere in southern cities, urban planners in India saw this as a chance to follow a much-promoted global urban solution. On the one hand, the BRT addressed the social pressure to provide for marginalised residents and on the other, it helped to link to an international discourse of ‘best practice’ that could put Delhi on par with other emerging global cities.

However, the planners of this seemingly apolitical technical solution did not account for situated interests that can make or break copied interventions. Instead, Oommen and Sequeira

demonstrate how urban elites, opposed to the installation of the BRT, worked at the discursive and political levels to stop the project while still in its planning phase. The authors examine how the political realm triumphed against technical knowledge to support hegemonic narratives that support class divides. Elite interests refused to recognise the spatial relocation of the poor to the more visible BRT, and instead wanted to relegate and confine them to the Delhi metro. They saw this intervention “not just as a reallocation of space, but rather the overturning of social order” (2021, xx). Their investment in turning the technocratic language of the BRT into a political campaign points to how vocabulary is used as a political project to serve vested interests. The authors remind us that a progressive urban practice requires planners and transit practitioners aligned with ‘working class agendas’, to present an alternative aesthetic frame to ‘counter-hegemonic political discourse’. Essentially, the type of technical vocabulary followed by practitioners must absorb local contextual rules in order to avoid the political shaping of a discourse beyond their original aims.

Which vocabulary matters?

This special issue presents diverse perspectives on how urban lexicons can be socially constructed, politically motivated, and shaped and are shaped by grounded urban practice. We contribute to debates on decolonising power and authority in urban thought and practice by expanding what it means to think, write and speak from the South (Barua and Jellis, 2018; Bhan, 2019; Sharp, 2019). These papers contribute to rethinking the incremental build-up of vocabulary in two ways. First, they provide insights into how ‘traveling ideas’ can become an acquired urban organising logic of cities such as the concept of ‘stigma’ in Istanbul; while other contexts reject imported characterisations of local practices that contradict with grounded empirical engagement, such as the use of gentrification in India. Second, we have explored how urban

vocabularies are inherently political in nature and have always been used as forms of colonial dominance, forced urban imaginaries and neoliberal catchphrases (Arabindoo, 2011). Today, technocratic language intended to improve urban conditions can quickly be co-opted into political discourses that derail intended outcomes for marginalised citizens. The political project of vocabularies often supersedes their intrinsic use and value.

Academics pursuing an inclusive urban agenda should acknowledge the inherent discrepancies in an accumulated urban lexicon. We illustrate some of these dilemmas such as the attempt to redefine quality standards and the production of mainstream knowledge; as well as how to engage in ways to decentre the location of urban vocabulary production through reflective practices. These reflective practices, such as global and local conversations, practices and theoretical conceptualisations, are at the core of decolonising strategies. In order to shift beyond the generation of familiar and blanket lexicons from spaces of power, we strive to adapt the hierarchical gaze to changing landscapes and communities. We highlight the significance of the fluidity of vocabulary as one of the ways to animate knowledge production across borders, theory and practice.

While the papers in this special issue began an in-depth epistemological engagement to deconstruct urban lexicons, there is a need to further explore an expanded understanding of the urban. Authors in this special issue, however, are not calling for the creation of a new vocabulary, but instead question what remains missing, is invisibilised and/or depoliticised by our choice of words, and how we can systematically unpack elite interpretations that disavow the urban experience for a majority of the Southern populations. The question is then not just which vocabulary matters, but whose vocabulary matters as well.

Moving forward with a sustained reflective engagement and collective work, we recognise the challenge of ‘knowing everyday life’ in its fullest and most authentic experience. Geographies are continuously changing and so do words along with them. Instead of ‘prescriptions’ (Barua and Jellis, 2018), we encourage the recognition of histories, politics, dialects and the impact of using certain vocabularies, whether they are dislodged in new spaces or grounded in others. Building these new geographies of vocabulary from different spaces is inherently a reflective practice that demands future engagement with the registres of translations (Sharp, 2019), scale, class and solidarity-building. This special issue positions these practices at the heart of decentring modes of knowledge production, and questions how and where vocabulary is built, and which and whose vocabulary ultimately matters.

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