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Dialogues in
Human Geography

Extending dialogues on the urban

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Abstract

Across the different vernaculars of the world's urban majorities, there is renewed bewilderment as to what is going on in the cities in which they reside and frequently self-build. Prices are unaffordable and they are either pushed out or strongly lured away from central locations. Work is increasingly temporary, if available at all, and there is often just too much labour involved to keep lives viably in place. Not only do they look for affordability and new opportunities in increasingly distant suburbs and hinterlands, but for orientations, for ways of reading where things are heading, increasingly hedging their bets across multiple locations and affiliations. Coming together to write this piece from our own multiple orientations, we are eight researchers who, over the past year, joined to consider how variegated trajectories of expansion unsettle the current logic of city-making. We have used the notion of extensions as a way of thinking

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about operating in the middle of things, as both a reflection of and a way of dealing with this unsettling. An unsettling that disrupts clear designations of points of departure and arrival, movement and settlement, centre and periphery, and time and space.

Keywords
Belt and Road initiative, Bengal, Brazilian Amazon, Chennai, Delhi, extended urbanization, Jakarta, Madagascar, Southern Italy

We write in response to several commentaries on our collectively written article (Simone et al., 2025), which seeks to instigate discussion about experimental concepts and practices in urban theorising. Having sacrificed a certain degree of empirical depth for a relational coverage of multiple geographies and dimensions, we are cognizant of the challenges entailed in having to generate a response to the commentaries in this article forum. We are most grateful for our interlocutors' engagement with our writing and we engage, in turn, with their insightful responses in a number of points to follow.

The urban majorities are too often expected to know what they are doing. In other words, their doing should, in order to be 'proper' and 'worthy' of global, public, and institutional attention, be informed by a way of knowing reduced to the repetition of a standardised litany of cultural facts that convey what it is possible and legitimate to think and do. They should always have their own self-interests in mind and respond rationally to incentives – such as the affordances offered by states and various private sectors, as well as to avoid moral and physical hazards. They should do the 'right thing' and organise in the 'right way'. Yet, their doing, organising, sensing, and feeling are often overlooked, or overridden, in research. We approached our collective article with this problem in mind.

As El-Husseiny (2025) points out in their commentary, Cairo in a fundamental way is being 'replaced' in scores of new towns and cities in the desert. Not just extended or relocated, but outright replaced, and in a site traditionally associated with death. Cairo is no longer governable, in part, because many of its residents can no longer afford

to do anything but move restlessly across its intricate spaces in constant collisions, intersections, and provisional collaborations of all kinds and, at the same time, fortify meagre yet viable ways of life through dense interiorities. But the new cities emerging out of death literally repeat that death, as those places blend 'heterogeneous urban imaginaries of power, discontent, and becoming that never cease to escape the colonial past, yet still arrive in new locations at the desert' (El-Husseiny, 2025).

Yet there are, as El-Husseiny emphasises, traditions of the oppressed that do not depend upon action plans, strategic rationales, or comprehensive calculations. Rather, they continuously find ways to interrupt the diagrams of power, the discursive forms of ideological confinement, and the lures of consumer captivation to constantly rearrange the bits and pieces of territory, political manoeuvres, and materials that are by-products of the conceit of the ruling regime to define everything as well as designate, frame, and police spaces according to specific lines of extraction and use. El-Husseiny calls this a spiralling, drawing on Fanon, among other literary works in Haiti developed several decades ago. The work of these *spiralists* avoided statements, opting instead for cultivating landscapes full of remains, detached details not easily integrated into any programme. For the spiral was the antithesis of articulation. The gathering up in its equilibration between centrifugal and centripetal forces is not an account, not a line of valuation, not a device that places things in a respective or respectable position.

In the working-class neighbourhoods of central Jakarta, for instance, spiralling refers to a practice of mobility supported by cheap boarding house rooms and food stalls, cheap places to hear the

conversations of strangers, to be folded into various schemes and projects that mostly never materialise and yet never cease to be offered and experimented with. At the same time, these practices are seen less as individual projects than as a collective, even civic responsibility. They carry forth not only their own aspirations but those of their respective 'hoods'. As such, it coincides with El-Husseiny's 'tactics [that] involve capturing the broken pieces and extending their base of operation. A survivalist mechanism is to rely on time, rhythms, and *passe*'.

In El-Husseiny's understanding of our theorisation, as in our own, extensionality is not the deployment and reaching outward of a coherent logic or image of viable urban inhabitation or resistance. It is a continuous process, in line with the traditions of the oppressed, to circumvent the constant reiteration of death as urban policy by keeping alive all of the broken things – dreams, building materials, social ties, practices of play and livelihoods – as an anterior future. It is a way for all these broken things not to be repaired, recuperated, or composed into a new narrative, but rather for the brokenness to continuously posit its own tentative dispositions, to reach out to a plethora of bits and pieces in order to stage-specific time- and space-limited attainments of some limited autonomy. In this extension, no superseding claims are made, and no judgements are rendered as to the worth of anything, however, broken; no matter what value it might have once had or could have again.

Writing from what is arguably an extension of the Indian nation-state, anthropologist Dolly Kikon (2022) argues that the resource-rich and indigenous states of northeastern India are already an extractive landscape, with stories of the actual lives lived by mostly indigenous people here being 'empirical fodder'. From a similar standpoint, we posit that the stories in our collective article are not only incomplete but also difficult to label. This is an attempt at cultivating practices of writing that refrain from extractive, transparent, and often binary articulation. Stories are the point. That these stories are often messy and do not offer easy understanding reflects the refusals of these urban majorities, their disobedience (Cadena, 2019), to the dictates of normative urbanisation and consequent marginalisation, and their insistence on

operating in what we called 'the middle of things' (Simone et al., 2025).

However, as Boudreau (2025) points out in her commentary, extensionality is also a matter of extending gestures – all of the small enactments that etch out spaces of transaction, of the willingness to engage or disengage, to attend or to ignore, to constrain or facilitate. For, as she emphasises, every situation, every point on the map, does not stay still, even if it goes nowhere, because it is riven with multiple temporalities, of things passing through at different speeds and impacts, as well as inhabitants always reaching toward a larger world of operations, attempting to make their worlds and experiences relevant or irrelevant to a wider range of actors. She reminds us that

> Understanding the complexity of life in these spaces requires being attentive to the intertwining of multiple temporalities: the rapidity of geopolitical and economic cycles, the desired duration of massive infrastructure development, the abrupt abandonment of a development, and the daily rhythms of people inhabiting these materially incomplete spaces. (Boudreau, 2025)

These matters of time include 'past futures': things that have yet to come but remain alive as possibilities, similarly to what El-Husseiny (2025) insists are pasts that refuse to remain past. Extension is, therefore, not the reaching toward a conclusion, even if an array of imaginations may wish for things to settle once and for all. Rather, as El-Husseiny points out, extensions are a *not-yet:* something that, in the present, may take the form of a concrete abstraction or image of a desired life, but that has not yet fully concretised, not yet really taken shape as a destination, and that remains open to discovery across what Boudreau (2025) calls 'multiple scales of becoming'.

Perhaps this is why residents in our respective urban extensions sometimes report being 'bewildered' by what is taking place, since the array of what has been taken apart and built, rejiggered, ruined, and effaced seems so vast that it is difficult to acquire an orientation. Mohamed (2025) rightly points to latency in the use of the term

'bewilderment' in our text. She asks, who is bewildered and why?. Citing African economic history, a multiplicity of forms and methods of monetary transactions both constituting and dealing with 'an unmanageable economic power' can seem to be bewildering (Mohamed, 2025). Yet, traders rarely have difficulty switching registers and modalities, always negotiating shifting notions of valuation. Like time, the lines that extend, connect, fade, or rupture are all over the place, always suggesting virtual tangents and leaps. Bewilderment, according to Mohamed, is a tension between the familiar and the estranged objects around. For example, the author shows this by dwelling upon the bewilderment of the protagonists from Ben Okri's novel, *The Famished Road*.

However, if one probes the notion of bewilderment a bit more playfully, it is possible to see it not simply as a disorientation but also as an invitation to the state of *being wild*, where the bits and pieces of lives cross-species and degrees of liveliness are gathered to enact dispositions that cannot be mapped in advance, that take on many different possible futures even as the 'concrete trucks' circle all around. It may also be read as purposeful bewilderment, one appropriate to the politics of disobedience and refusal that we discussed above. This suspension of orientation also exposes the body to unanticipated vulnerability and violence: there is no life boat in a river without a middle, as inhabitants steer towards, actively creating the 'edges of a non-world' (Mohamed, 2025).

Of course, extensions sometimes knot up or become simulations, even parodies of themselves. As Adeniyi-Ogunyankin (2025) wisely reminds us, social media act as a promise of extensionality, in the sense that one might access and engage a panoply of experiences everywhere, and to distribute one's sensibilities across a vast terrain of otherwise unknown others, with a minimum of negotiation. Faced with an immediate environment crowded with aspirations and hustles, and with a shortage of real opportunities, appeals are made to an alleged *out there* as a locus of salvation. Yet, in lieu of sustained investigations into the operations of those domains, that are seen as bastions of wealth and worthiness, the urge is simply to

document some kind of proximity to it, as if compiling an extending archive of images and accumulating 'likes' for them will deliver the goods.

At times, extensionalities prompt detachment, things travelling in parallel lines, where the middle seems more an empty space than an arena of generative intersection. Adeniyi-Ogunyankin (2025) gestures to the simultaneous consolidation of 'aristocracies of wonderment', such as Pentecostalism, that offer a coherent narrative of future and historicity, and to the everyday life deployment of different times – scattered, polyrhythmic, fractured, shape-shifting. Works of queer theory, for example, can help us think about how to navigate such parallel lines, and Adeniyi-Ogunyankin is correct in pointing out the need to engage them more fully in this work.

To conclude, we would like to reiterate what we stated at the beginning of this response: that our paper consists of a collective, conceptual exploration of 'how expanded trajectories of urban life unsettle the current logics of city-making' (Simone et al., 2025). Although not complete, and necessarily so, this theorisation points to the need to deal with the multiple existing disruptions of binary analytical categories, such as points of departure and arrival, movement and settlement, centre and periphery, time and space, in an 'urban' that, truly, extends beyond them. We did so by moving our individual and collective thinking across a variety of interdisciplinary scholarship in urban studies, cultural studies, anthropology, and beyond, while discussing our works and multiple expertise from and in 'the field(s)', where our regional and urban works are inevitably rooted.

As a result, we understand Chari's (2025) indication of a sort of incompleteness in our theoretical elaboration. That was indeed a conscious choice and part of our collective method, from which our relational theorising stemmed. That is to say, instead of looking for a consistent conceptual apparatus that could fully and clearly contain our multifaceted research experiences, we mobilised the spatiality of the 'extensions' to highlight the simultaneous existence of supposedly marginal and peripheral processes that frequently lack visibility and due recognition. In ways that are always multiple and sometimes even contradictory, we considered

all of them as extensions of other, more centralised, operations that lie in the spotlight of contemporary global capitalism. While we disagree with the conflation between urban majorities and authoritarian majoritarianism, we welcome Chari's invitation to expand and delve into the specificities of our individual pieces, as indeed many of us have done elsewhere (e.g. on the Brazilian Amazon, see Castriota and Tonucci, 2018; on Tangier and Jakarta, see Simone, 2020, 2023; on the Mediterranean and Southern Italy, see Torino, 2023; on Fort-Dauphin, see Somda, 2021; on Delhi, see Bathla, 2022, 2024) and are planning to continue doing so under the purview of our Urban Extensions Collective.

Nevertheless, our intention was not to consider the stories we narrated in complete isolation with actions and processes happening elsewhere. While we claim that the sum of these parts does not produce any sort of consistent integrity, we consider these spaces as extensions precisely in order to point out elements of *continuity* with operations that are normally understood, both theoretically and in everyday accounts, as spectacular centralities. As we mentioned in our piece, and as Mohamed poignantly captured in their commentary, 'extensions' in our analysis are about thinking with relations (Glissant, 1997).

Consequently, bewilderment is not just a passive response to an overly complex world, but an affective accompaniment to a form of distributed agency where individuals work with what is on offer, whether or not the offerings necessarily fit into a programme or coherent unit (and they often do not), and where agency is the incongruous sum of all the efforts that are being made to extend these heterogeneous offerings to each other, as diverse trajectories of engagement. The efficacy of inhabitation, thus, is reoriented away from feelings of completion or any rational subsumption of the parts into an integral whole. Rather, whether something works or not entails a sense of disorientation, a sense of being all over the place: the affective dimension of extending and being extended.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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