

'The city should again become a common good'

Interview with Neil Brenner

Professor Neil Brenner (Graduate School of Design, Harvard University) was the guest of the Liquidation conference that took place in Gallery Miroslav Kraljevic in Zagreb on 3rd and 4th of May, 2014 [<http://www.g-mk.hr/vijesti/>], as a part of an international interdisciplinary project. In this interview he discusses his contribution to the event in the context of his broader engagement with the field of critical urban theory.

DM: Can you tell us what you will be talking about in Zagreb?

NB: My understanding is that the conference is about changes in Zagreb, and the ways that neoliberal policies are privatising urban space. I'm going to talk about the ways in which critical urban theory can illuminate some broader political and economic and spatial transformations that are happening not just in Zagreb, but in cities all around the world. The field of critical urban theory has developed some provocative interpretations of what underlies these broader processes and how we may oppose them. I will offer a broad global framing, summarizing some of the main categories that are used in the field of critical urban theory that might help us understand these more local struggles.

DM: Will you present some examples?

NB: Instead of reporting on examples, my whole approach in general is to present some perspectives from the realm of theory, and then to dialogue with different communities about how those theoretical perspectives could illuminate local conditions, problems or struggles.

DM: Do urban planners or municipalities ever ask for your opinion, or advice from your field of expertise?

NB: At the moment I am more frequently invited to engage with activists and artists, other scholars, sometimes architects and planners. But I'm certainly interested in progressive, radical and transformative approaches to urban policy.

DM: How would you explain your position as a critical urban theorist?

NB: As a theorist, I am interested in getting clear about the concepts that we use in everyday life and in professional practice to understand cities and urbanization processes. For me, theory is about clarifying the concepts we use and presuppose to understand the world. As a critical urban theorist, I am very interested in ideologies of the urban, in the ways in which notions of the urban are used to form and legitimate political projects that reinforce the inequalities and power relations of modern capitalism. I am also interested in developing concepts that might inform and empower social movements that are fighting to create more just, democratic and ecologically viable forms of cities and urbanization.

DM: In the present situation, we often hear that 50% of the world population is living in cities. Is this an example of an urban ideology?

NB: This is a widely quoted idea that is derived from the United Nations' data on global population levels. The attempt to measure the world's urban population has a long history in the UN, and it is anything but scientific. In fact it has long been based upon highly problematic empirical techniques and deeply ideological theoretical assumptions.

In one sense, it's true that the world is increasingly becoming an urban world, and it's also certainly true that urbanization processes are transforming the places that we live in. But in order to count the number of people living in cities, you first have to define what a city is—not a simple matter. Indeed there is massive disagreement on this issue among the national census bureaus upon which the UN bases its data on the 50% threshold we have supposedly crossed. Additionally, there are questions of interpretation. What exactly is a city, and why does it matter, and to whom, to say that we all now live in these settlement types?

I would raise two questions for anyone who embraces the idea of the “urban age,” defined in these terms. First, is it really useful to subsume the diversity of urban conditions and urbanization processes around the world under the single label of the “city”? Don't we need more differentiated categories to understand changing patterns of settlement and the transformation of our built environments?

Second, what about the supposed “rural” or “non-urban” world outside of the cities? Is it really irrelevant now, due to depopulation? Our research at the Urban Theory Lab-GSD (urbantheorylab.net) shows that, on the contrary, the

“non-city” landscapes of the world—including some of the world’s most remote places, like the Arctic, the Amazon, the world’s deserts and mountain ranges and oceans—have actually become quite fundamental, in operational terms, in providing various kinds of support for urban life. Whether as resource extraction zones, agricultural and logistics landscapes, or waste dumps, the “non-city” territories of the world have been operationalized to support the urbanization of the entire planet, and they are being radically, destructively transformed through their role in this process.

By contrast, the urban age concept implies a simple, linear, world-wide transition from the rural to the urban. I find that it confuses more than it illuminates about both sides of the supposed urban/rural dualism.

DM: But we still talk about limited space. If we talk about sustainability, we are still talking about that 1% using the resources of these 99%.

NB: Measuring the world’s urban population is very confusing and is based upon a statistical disaster, actually. The problem is that every national government defines the city and the urban according to its own census categories and indicators. So in some countries it is the population threshold, for instance 20,000. Sometimes they combine indicators like population density or employment conditions to determine the nature of the urban. Sometimes the city is simply an administrative category. So, the notion of a 50% global urban population threshold is deeply misleading because so many different kinds of data and measurement techniques are used in national territories across the world.

If one large country, like India or China, changes its definition of the cities—which sometimes happens—then the entire world urban population goes up or down. But the point that I'm trying to make is that it is not just an empirical question, it's a theoretical question. What is the city, what is the urban, that makes it important and meaningful for us to say that a certain percentage of the population lives in cities, within this condition that we call urban?

As I suggested earlier, our work in the Urban Theory Lab suggests that more and more zones of the planet—including the atmosphere, the oceans, even areas that otherwise seem quite “remote”—are being exploited and operationalized in order to support the agglomerations, the big cities. But even though these apparently very remote and relatively unpopulated zones of the world have become operational landscapes to support city growth elsewhere, they are not

included in the concept of the urban age, which is totally agglomeration-centric. That's why that proposition for me is thoroughly ideological, because it directs our attention to the big settlements alone, treating them as quasi-self-propelled motors of growth, without illuminating the many ways in which the urban life that is agglomerated within them hinges upon the transformation of landscapes and territories elsewhere.

DM: I am thinking of the classical definition of cities, so one way of determine some settlement as the city is based on the sector of the economy that prevails. Size doesn't matter; some places with very few inhabitants can be cities.

NB: In China or India the definition is completely different; every country has its own set of criteria for the "city." So when you pour all these different definitions into the UN data tables, it's fully chaotic—really quite a shocking empirical mess for an international organization that wields such widespread influence over public discourse about cities.

We also have to raise the question: what are the forms of dispossession and displacement in the so-called "countryside" that are contributing to the mass migration to the cities which is celebrated not only by the UN but by policy makers, local boosterists and developers, and mainstream economic and social commentators all over the world? In other words, why is it not possible for many people to live in a sustainable way outside of these big cities, the megacities of the global South for example? What's actually happening in the larger territorial landscapes, whether in the former socialist world or in the industrial capitalist world or in the global South, that is causing this massive displacement of the people from the rural areas into the big cities? That question has got to be posed as an urgent and fundamental political question—otherwise we are simply taking for granted that the so-called rural-to-urban transition is necessary, irreversible, ecological and good.

These are dangerous and misleading assumptions. Is it really beneficial for society or the environment or democracy, for political life, for social life, that more and more people move to the giant megacities, whose infrastructures are radically inadequate to the demands being placed upon them? Is this really what people would choose if there were sustainable forms of employment and social reproduction, access to the land, to food, to secure conditions of life, and indeed public infrastructures of urbanism, outside the massive cities where so much of employment, housing and basic living conditions are highly precarious?

DM: Do you have any findings what goes on in the depopulated areas?

NB: Well, there are different forms of restructuring and changes in conditions of land ownership in different zones of the world economy that are contributing to these urbanization processes. So the first claim I would make is that, instead of just assuming that there is a natural, irreversible move from the countryside to the city, we have to look at particular policies, institutions, property relations and power hierarchies that are contributing to this mass migration in different zones of the world economy. In South Asia, the answer might be different than it is in China, and the answer in those zones is surely different than it is in the former socialist world of Eastern Europe or in the former Soviet Union. I think that it's closely tied to the ongoing, increasingly intensive and extensive enclosure of land, to the reorganization of property relations, which have made it increasingly difficult for people to survive in the erstwhile rural zones. There are different forms of enclosure and land grabbing happening in Africa and in parts of Latin America that are undermining many forms of small-scale farming and agriculture, but then again, it's very difficult to generalize across territories or continents. We have to look at these questions in different contexts, rather than just assuming that there is a natural, necessary trend to move from the countryside to the city. Both sides of this dualism are being transformed through urbanization processes, and they are mediated through (increasingly market-oriented) political institutions, the reorganization of land ownership and land use, and often speculative, transnational corporate investment strategies—there is nothing natural or necessary about what's happening here.

DM: Still, we would have to have some sort of common frame because all these processes can be reduced to one thing – they are unsustainable. And for example, if European Union perceives a country like Croatia like a large European tourist resort, exclusive policies make no sense. One state or region cannot make their own decisions, disregarding larger or global policies.

NB: Exactly. I think it's a plausible hypothesis that these transformations are connected to the large-scale strategies of transnational corporations which are trying to instrumentalize land, territory and resources to maximize profits, often through the use of quite speculative financial instruments that put the future of entire territories at risk. In the process, they are displacing people from established ways of living and from access to the commons, from the resources they need to survive outside of commodity relations, the wage relation. But how does that play out? In other words, what are the specific strategies of the corporations, how do state institutions mediate these accumulation strategies,

what is the role of financial speculation in the reorganization of land-use systems and territorial organization – these and many other questions have to be posed in the relation to particular places and regions.

DM: Who is to mediate these strategies between corporations and the citizens – local governments, municipalities ... ? Who is to control these processes?

NB: It's a political question, it plays out in different ways in different countries. There's a lot of resistance in different parts of the world to these strategies of territorial enclosure, hypercommodification and financialization. Capitalist corporations cannot simply impose their will without a political structure that enables them to do that, nor can they pursue their accumulation strategies without ideologies that justify, legitimate or naturalize their activities.

However, to the degree that political systems are democratically controlled at any spatial scale, there is a possibility to use governmental regulation to protect people from the processes of commodification and accumulation by dispossession that are now being intensified around the world. And of course the realm of ideology is essential—we have plenty of evidence that privatization is disastrous—both socially polarizing and environmentally regressive. We also have plenty of counter-ideologies that emphasize the benefits of collective management and popular democratic control over social resources: they remain as relevant as ever in this supposedly “post-socialist” epoch. So, it's ultimately a political question.

DM: Could we say that participatory practices, at least if we talk about stable democracies like in Western European countries, might improve living and working conditions of its citizens?

NB: Privatizing local assets is the predominant global strategy of our time, and yet it fails recurrently. If social resources are controlled by private corporations, it often leads to massive inequalities, and to serious deficits in the actual services that are being provided. The currently popular assumption that the market is the best means to provide public goods is deeply problematic. We have a plenty of evidence that in over two centuries of capitalism, relying purely on market forces results in massive failures in terms of social equality, dislocation, environmental destruction, democratic accountability and so forth. So the question is how to re-assert democratic and socially coordinated control over the city, and indeed the territory, as the commons, the collective resource which is actually produced and shared by all, rather than having the future of

our world decided by those with the power to make investment decisions on a private, individual and profit-maximizing basis. The private control over investment decisions that, in practice, impact the entire city, territory or indeed the whole planet, is a social and ecological catastrophe.

DM: So, knowing all that, the society is constantly repeating and repeating the same mistakes. Would well-informed, politically active citizenry be a prerequisite for the changes?

NB: In the notion of French author Henri Lefebvre, who was deeply interested in the Yugoslav experience, *autogestion*, or self-management—radical or grassroots democratic control—must lie at the heart of any democratic form of socialism. But Lefebvre, who was highly critical of the French Communist party, and also somewhat sceptical about Yugoslav autogestionary experiments in the 1970s, pointed out a difficult problem here: autogestion can only be activated from below, by the actors themselves; if you try to stimulate it from above, you undermine the basic principle of the grassroots. In other words, sure, we want to have a governmental system that promotes citizens initiatives, but that's a fundamental contradiction, because stimulating such initiatives from above is often precisely at odds with the core impulse and orientation of autogestion, which by definition has to come from below.

So the question really is how can you create a social formation in which political institutions are constantly open to being appropriated and transformed through initiatives from the bottom up—without ever closing off that accessibility to future projects that promote new forms of transformation from below. Lefebvre himself suggested that if you had a fully autogestionary or self-managed society, the state would constantly be appropriated and transformed from below. As such, he somewhat mischievously suggested, it would “wither away” in the sense once postulated by Lenin in a radically different context. It is very complicated, and the answer can only be explored in the realm of practice—theory can only analyze the hazards, the risks, the contradictions, also the possibilities

DM: Do you see a way of employing these theoretical aspects that we've talked about, in projects of any scale?

NB: I work a lot with architects, landscape architects and urban planners in my teaching. And the general argument I make to my design students is that we need to think not just about the site that a client has requested us to build upon;

we need to think more broadly, about how our work might address some of the great problems of modern society, related to social and territorial inequality, economic crisis, unemployment, environmental degradation, public health and so forth. But in order to do that, we cannot simply think of the site in terms of the building or even the neighbourhood; we need to connect these scales up to much broader problems of worldwide capitalist society. The design disciplines need to avoid a purely technical orientation, simply following directions that the client gives—they need to be fully political and politicized, in my opinion. We have to have a broader normative and political vision of how architecture, planning and design can be politically relevant to addressing some of the deep social and environmental crises of the 21st century capitalism.

So, what I am really trying to offer is not so much a strategy, but a method. It's a method for connecting the work of design, architecture and planning to engagements with broader political, economic, social and environmental conditions, processes and transformations. I can't figure out what the answer is on an abstract level, but I can plead with my students to work as hard as they can, under the institutional and locational conditions in which they find themselves, to make these connections, and then to follow them, beyond the sites of their specific projects, back out to the big problems of modern capitalist society. I constantly urge them: don't simply adopt narrow technical standards, be more political, be more socially engaged, be more humanitarian, be more radical in your work! Use the powerful tools of architecture and planning to promote democratic, environmentally rational, socially just transformations in cities, territories, landscapes.

I find that my students are urgently seeking out ways to make these connections, and we learn a lot from each other as we dialogue about how to do this in different contexts and in relation to a wide range of issues.

DM: So, basically, urban planning should be political statement?

NB: Architecture and landscape architecture too—all of the design disciplines. They should be political statements, but not simply in the sense that state institutions define the political. They should be political statements in an radically autogestory sense, empowering people to appropriate the right to the city for themselves, in and through their everyday lives.