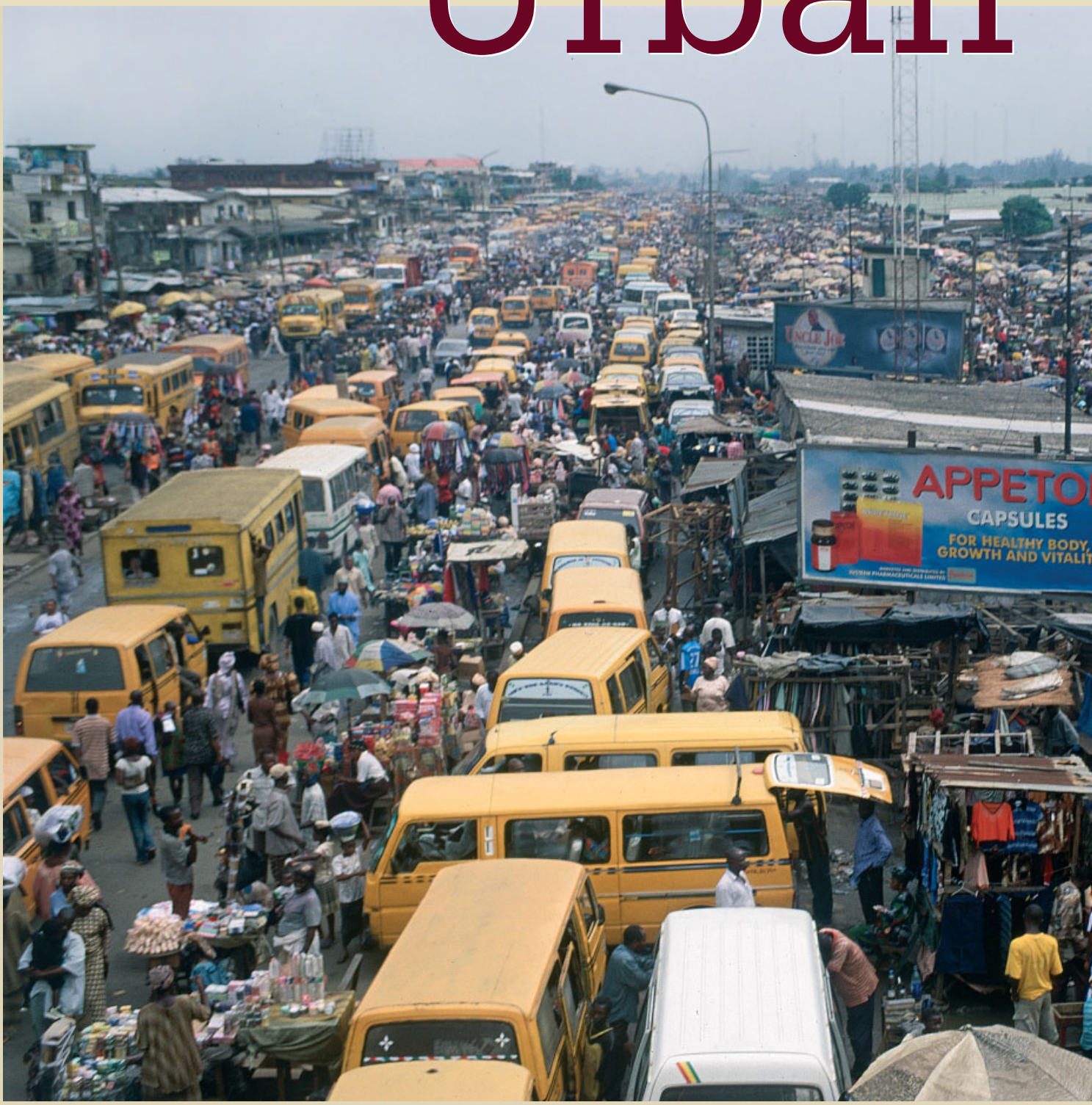
Urban



Flux

In the 21st century, why does the type of poverty and human exploitation most readily associated with Dickensian London or the 'dark Satanic Mills' of Victorian England still persist today? **Matthew Gandy**, Professor of Geography at University College London, and Director of the UCL Urban Laboratory, lifts the lid on the unevenness of global development, revealing why contemporary urban space continues to be characterised by landscapes of neglect interspersed with areas of intense investment and consumption.

Oshodi, Lagos, 2003
Market spaces are the fulcrum of the urban economy but are also potential sites for social and ethnic violence.

In the early hours of 26 August 2005 a fire swept through a dilapidated apartment in central Paris crowded with African immigrants. Among 17 dead there were 14 children. In April 2005 another similar fire had killed 24 people, again mostly poor immigrants. The buildings in which these people lived were unfit for human habitation: cracked walls, lead paint, dangerous wiring, infested with vermin. In 2004 some 100,000 people were searching for social housing in Paris, a marked increase on 10 years earlier, but only 12,000 homes were allocated, leading to excessive overcrowding.[1]

In Paris and other ostensibly prosperous cities we find the persistence of 19th-century forms of poverty and human exploitation. In some cases, the very same areas, such as London's Somers Town or Manchester's Ancoats, have remained centres of deprivation for centuries. In the cities of the global South the scale of suffering and human degradation is far worse, yet the technical means to improve urban living conditions are not obscure – better housing, improved health care, modern plumbing and so on. Despite the efforts of early social scientists to demonstrate the connections between labour markets and poverty, or the role of public health advocates in forcing improvements in the way cities are managed, we have nonetheless retained nefarious elements of the 19th-century city ranging from inept forms of urban governance to renewed moral admonitions towards the poor.

The characteristic urban form associated with the modern city masks a diversity of different elements. In a colonial or postcolonial context we find that these 'multiple modernities' are even more apparent through the interweaving of different geometries of power, belief and social stratification. The relationship between democracy and the public realm, for example, is scarcely addressed in the recent elision between neo-liberal reform and the imposition of 'good governance' that has characterised much recent writing on policy dilemmas facing the cities of the global South.[2] Yet the weakness of the state, particularly beyond middle-class enclaves, necessitates an expanded definition of power to account for the daily practices through which resources such as land, water and shelter rights are actually allocated. The urbanisation of nature and the concomitant development of elaborate technological networks have involved an intersection between established sources of state authority and a plethora of other actors. Cities of the global South have been

simultaneously shaped by officially acknowledged forms of state intervention in combination with an expanding zone of local negotiations to produce a 'shadow state' where the boundaries between different loci of political authority and legitimacy become extensively blurred.[3]

It is striking how fear and disdain for the urban poor remains so powerful today through the proliferation of gated communities and the clearing away of informal settlements. In India, for example, the war on the poor has become one of the dominant elements of environmental demands to 'clean up' cities and remove 'encroachers and polluters'.[4] Whether in London or Mumbai, a vast army of cheap labour is needed to allow the urban economy to function, yet the rich increasingly prefer not to mix with these people. Many architects and planners acquiesce in these processes, seemingly willing to transform cities into playgrounds for the wealthy where professional ethics is subsumed by the cult of celebrity, real-estate speculation and a new homogeneity in urban life.[5]

Amukoko, Lagos, 2003
A tangled mass of water pipes passing through an open sewer in a city where religiosity has increasingly supplanted political discourse.

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The landscape of the modern city bears the imprint of successive cycles of investment in the built environment: new waves of construction leave their mark through characteristic architectural styles or morphological arrangements of different elements. In London, for example, significant tracts of Bloomsbury and Mayfair are the outcome of Georgian speculation while the expansion of railways in the Victorian era fuelled the growth of new suburbs such as Clapham and Wandsworth. Similarly, in the 20th century, the building of the London underground fostered waves of development in proximity to stations on the urban fringe, most notably 'Metroland' along the newly extended Metropolitan Line.

The ebb and flow of capital investment in urban space has produced a complex layering of forms and structures so that remnants of past waves of economic prosperity, such as empty factories or workshops, are either obliterated to make way for new developments or converted into new uses such as shopping malls or luxury housing. Early experiments in the reuse of former industrial spaces in Baltimore, London and other cities now extend to centres of transnational consumption at a global scale: the former mills of Mumbai's Lower Parel district, for example, are being busily converted into galleries, shops and luxury apartments.

In tandem with the transformation of the visible city we find that an invisible city of urban technological networks – largely hidden from view beneath the city streets – has also undergone profound changes. Successive waves of technology have produced a complex mass of pipes and wires to produce a physical mesh that is now juxtaposed with the emerging wireless city to produce an increasingly differentiated patchwork of connectivity in comparison with the more standardised landscapes associated with the Fordist metropolis.

Since the middle decades of the 19th century we find a periodicity in levels and patterns of investment in the physical infrastructure of cities that is reflective of prevailing macro-economic conditions and the changing institutional context for banking and finance. In addition to longer-term economic waves associated with technological innovations – so-called Kondratieff waves – economic historians have identified smaller cycles associated with particular forms of investment such as real estate, raw materials or agriculture. Though the explanations for these fluctuations explored by Schumpeter, Kuznets and others have now been subject to extensive critique, there nonetheless remains extensive empirical evidence for distinct 'building cycles' in relation to the development of cities that lead to instability in housing markets, construction activity and other key

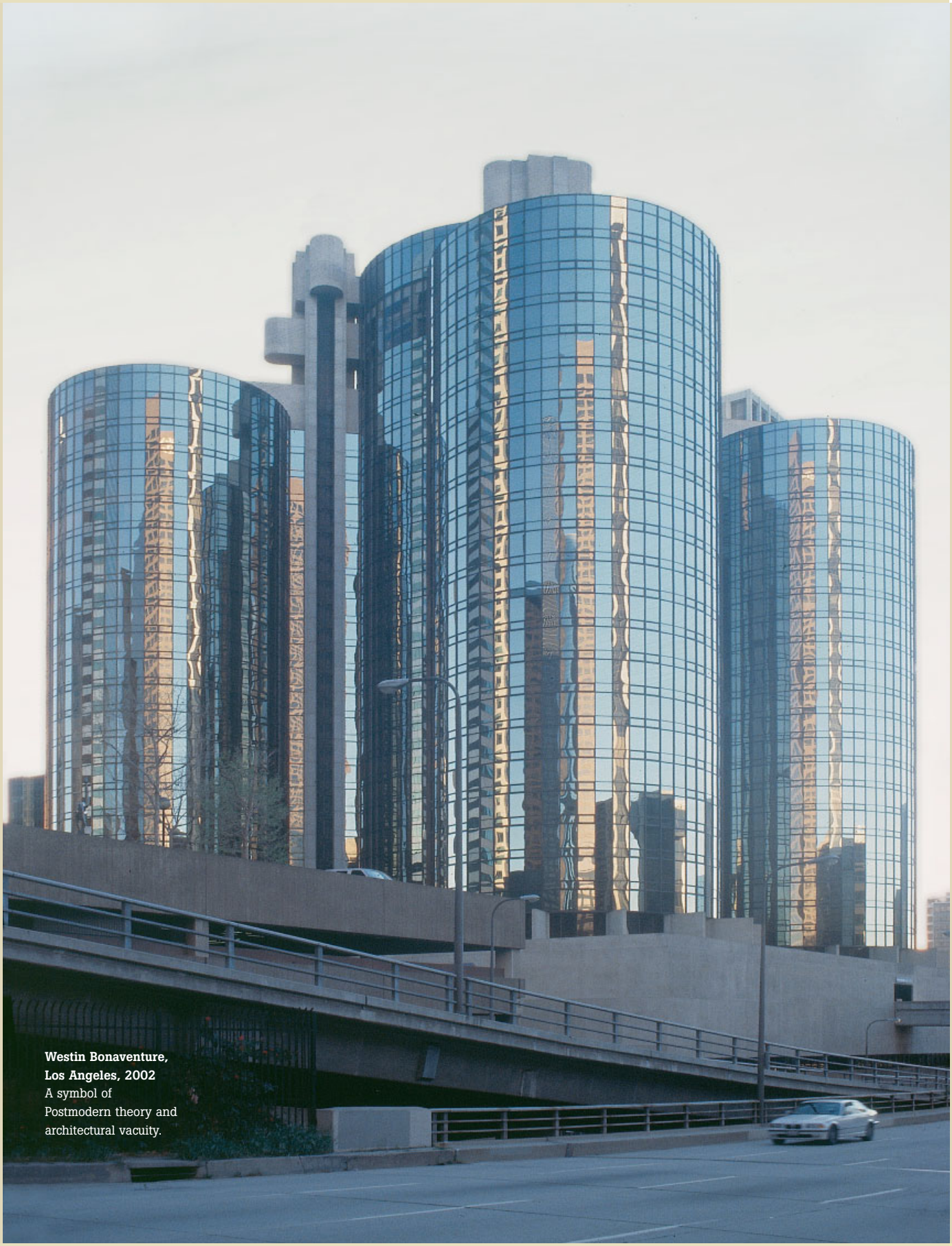
Carson, Los Angeles, 2002
Looking south, a vast and largely deserted landscape of pylons next to the Los Angeles River.

elements underpinning capitalist urbanisation.[6] In periodic episodes of economic turbulence we can encounter sudden and dramatic devaluation of existing components of capital stock so that even recently completed office or retail spaces may in some instances be simply abandoned: the Asian financial crisis of 1995–7, for example, was partly driven by an over-investment in real-estate profits that depended on the stability of local currencies.[7]

The implications of the current global crisis have yet to be fully manifested as the effects of the banking and mortgage crisis begin to work their way through successive national economies. These 'switching crises' are enabled by the mobility of capital and its incessant search for higher rates of return: a short-term ruthlessness that is being underpinned by the growing power of institutional shareholders such as pension funds.[8]

Contemporary urban space is characterised by landscapes of neglect interspersed with intense foci of capital accumulation and elite consumption: in the case of London, for example, earlier waves of gentrification have been superseded by new patterns of consumption that are transnational in their orientation.[9] Vast managerial remuneration packages on the back of inflated share values have distorted the entire housing market leading to indebtedness for those on average incomes, increased overcrowding and the rise of reactionary or neo-fascist politics in working-class areas cut adrift from neo-liberal policy-making. The growing market for exclusive properties has led to a spate of new schemes such as a planned luxury housing project overlooking Hyde Park in central London designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners that includes penthouse flats to be offered at over £80 million. These flats – the most expensive ever constructed in the UK – may feature bulletproof glass, specially purified air and 'panic rooms' to protect against intruders.[10]

In the suburbs of Moscow or St Petersburg, mansions can be commissioned on formerly publicly owned plots of land that exist as digital projections under names such as 'Versaille' or 'English Mansion'.[11] On the outskirts of Mumbai, a plethora of new elite housing developments is under construction that draws readily on pastoral imagery or aspects of ecological design such as Hiranandani Gardens or Kalapataru Towers. Where land is not made readily available to developers it can be acquired through corruption,



Westin Bonaventure, Los Angeles, 2002
A symbol of Postmodern theory and architectural vacuity.

intimidation or indeed arson in the case of semi-arid coastal regions in the Mediterranean where protected areas have been destroyed to eliminate their biotic diversity and thwart possible planning restrictions. In more extreme cases land is forcibly released by vast slum clearances as in the neo-Hausmannite programme of urban regeneration currently under way in Indian cities such as Delhi or Mumbai, or the removal of poor communities through state-sponsored acts of mass violence, as in the anti-Muslim pogroms that recently swept through the centre of Ahmadabad.

The construction of luxury developments provides a lineage to authoritarian spaces of 'super consumption', such as Dubai, that are in turn linked to the geopolitical dynamics of organised crime, tax avoidance and oil wealth.[12] Property-led forms of urban regeneration are now operational in virtually all cities, even those such as Bologna, Copenhagen or Stockholm, which had previously sought to protect local housing markets from speculative pressures or had tolerated autonomous buildings or spaces on potentially valuable land.[13]

What alternatives exist for the 21st-century city? Certainly, we need to begin by disentangling past thinking: retain the 19th century's engineering brilliance, for example, but not its moral hypocrisy; nurture the 20th-century public realm, but not the autocratic or dysfunctional dimensions of state power. In the political sphere the idea of secular cosmopolitanism presents an alternative to the incessant drift towards greater division and segregation. Yet a cosmopolitanism that embraces cultural or ethnic difference is not to be confused with the pallid discourse of 'tolerance' where ignorance or suspicion is merely kept in abeyance.[14]

Intensifying global inequalities in wealth and poverty are marked by the vast growth of slums and the growing influence of transnational elites. Islands of gluttony also extend to the cities of the global north where spiralling income differentials, unstable housing markets and deteriorating public services are generating new landscapes of inequality and exclusion. The blocks of cramped, poor-quality housing that mark the 'regeneration' of London Docklands, for example, are a testament to London's denuded public realm and failure of imagination. Architects, planners and other professionals engaged in urban practice need to reflect on whether their projects are merely complicit elements in these processes or actively contributing towards a better future.

Alternative approaches to urban design are marked by a combination of long-term planning in the public interest and intricate engagement with clients to produce spaces that simultaneously fulfil a range of critical social, cultural and environmental objectives. In the field of housing, for instance, we might look to the exemplary Sargfabrik in Vienna or Hegianwandweg in Zürich, which both combine innovative design with inclusive social agendas. Similarly, in terms of landscape, the Mile End Park in London and Petuel Park in Munich exemplify how marginalised or neglected spaces can be reintegrated within the city and enrich urban quality of life. In all these cases we encounter a longer-term urban vision that transcends speculative myopia: it is only by raising expectations that urban practice can meet the real needs of the contemporary city. AD

Notes

1. David Fickling, 'Paris Apartment Fire Kills 17', *Guardian*, 26 August 2005.
2 Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoi Srivastava and Rêne Véron (eds), *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 2005; Matthew Gandy, 'Planning, anti-planning and the infrastructure crisis facing metropolitan Lagos', *Urban Studies* 43(2), 2006, pp 71–96.
3. Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 2003.
4. Partha Chatterjee, 'Are Indian cities becoming bourgeois at last?', in Indira Chandrasekhar and Peter C Seel (eds), *Body.city: siting contemporary culture in India*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Tulika Books (Berlin and Delhi), 2003, p 178.
5. Jonathan Raban, 'My Own Private Metropolis', *Financial Times*, 9–10 August 2008.
6. On the analysis of long waves in the capitalist economy see, for example, Angus Maddison, *Dynamic Forces in Capitalist Development: A Long-Run Comparative View*, Oxford University Press (Oxford), 1991; Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans Joris de Bres, Verso (London), 1977 [1972]; and Michael Marshall, *Long Waves of Regional Development*, Macmillan (London), 1987.
7. See, for example, Michael Pettis, *The Volatility Machine: Emerging Economies and the Threat of Financial Collapse*, Oxford University Press (Oxford), 2001; Joseph Stiglitz, 'Capital market liberalization, globalization and the IMF', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 20, 2004, pp 57–71. See also Ara Wilson, 'Bangkok, the bubble city', in Jane Schneider and Ida Susser (eds), *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World*, Berg (Oxford and New York), pp 203–26.
8. See, for example, Franklin R Edwards, 'Hedge funds and the collapse of long-term capital management', *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 13, Spring 1999, pp 189–210. On the spatial dynamics of 'switching crises' in the capitalist economy see David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, Blackwell (Oxford), 1982. For recent developments within the global economy see Andrew Glyn, *Capitalism Unleashed: Finance, Globalization, and Welfare*, Oxford University Press (Oxford), 2006; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press (Oxford), 2005).
9. Tim Butler and Loretta Lees, 'Super-gentrification in Barnsbury, London: globalization and gentrifying global elites at the neighbourhood level', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31, 2006, pp 467–87.
10. '125-Millionen-Euro-Wohnung zu verkaufen'. *Welt online*, 5 March 2007.
11. Alex Veness, 'Capital disturbance', paper presented to the AHRC funded seminar 'In search of the urban pastoral', held at CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), London, 29 March 2007. See also Tom Parfitt, 'Fear and Resentment as Moscow's Rich Grab Land for Luxury Homes', *Guardian*, 22 February 2007.
12. See Mike Davis, 'Fear and money in Dubai', *New Left Review* 41, 2006, pp 47–68.
13. In Stockholm, for example, gentrification pressures are occurring prior to transfers of tenure so that traditional explanations such as 'rent gap' theories need to be supplemented by a better understanding of the cultural dimensions to urban change and the influence of new urban elites. See Adam Millard-Ball, 'Moving beyond gentrification gaps: social change, tenure change and gap theories in Stockholm', *Urban Studies* 37, 2000, pp. 1673–93. See also M Franzén, 'New social movements and gentrification in Hamburg and Stockholm: a comparative study', *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 20, 2005, pp 51–77.
14. Vera Skvirskaya and Caroline Humphrey, 'Migration and the "post-cosmopolitan" city: The emergence of "tolerance" in Bukhara and Odessa," paper given at the Urban Salon, London, 10 March 2008.

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