

Edited by

**Elisabeth Blum
Jesko Fezer
Günther Fischer
Angelika Schnell**



Christian von Wissel

Dwelling Urbanism

City Making through Corporeal Practice in Mexico City

The Bauwelt Fundamente series was founded in 1963 by Ulrich Conrads; it was edited from the early 1980s to 2015 jointly with Peter Neitzke.

Supervising editor of this volume: Elisabeth Blum

Layout since 2017: Matthias Görlich

Front cover and back cover: by the author

Picture credit: all images by the author

Copy editing: Fionn Petch

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019944758

Bibliographic information published by the German National Library

The German National Library lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are reserved, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, re-use of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in other ways, and storage in databases.

For any kind of use, permission of the copyright owner must be obtained.

This publication is also available as an e-book
(ISBN PDF 978-3-0356-1831-0;
ISBN EPUB 978-3-0356-1823-5)

© 2019 Birkhäuser Verlag GmbH, Basel
P.O. Box 44, 4009 Basel, Switzerland
Part of Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston
and Bauverlag BV GmbH, Gütersloh, Berlin

bau || || verlag

Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-0356-1822-8

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

www.birkhauser.com



Contents

Introduction	17
1 Infrastructural Practice and the Making of City	27
1.1 Practicing the City	28
1.2 Social Practice, Body Space and Materiality as Mediator	38
1.3 Making and Thinking Space through the Practicing Body	42
2 Citying, Mexico City and Studying the Practice of City Making	51
2.1 Making Sense of Cities	52
2.2 The Case of Urbanising Mexico City	59
2.3 Studying the Materiality of Space and the Corporeality of Practice	68
3 Providing Lives	83
3.1 Infrastructures That Live: Doña Margo	85
3.2 Handling Movements: Eduardo	90
3.3 Forging Opportunities: Ivan	95
3.4 Facing Insecurity: Margarita	99
3.5 Labour of Conjunction	103
4 Growing Houses	113
4.1 Breaking Ground	115
4.2 Growing Custom-made	118
4.3 Investing the Living Body	122
4.4 Collectivity Work	128
4.5 Labour of Presence	132
4.6 Paper-Work	138
4.7 The Proof of Growth Is in Houses	144

5	Riding the Highway.....	153
5.1	Wrestling with Buses	155
5.2	Riding Buses	163
5.3	Managing Movement	167
5.4	Labour of Travel	172
6	City Making through Corporeal Practice	185
6.1	Dwelling Urbanism	186
6.2	The Plasticity of Space	189
6.3	Informality as a Form of Urbanisation	193
6.4	Re-Rethinking Urban Planning	197
6.5	Making Centrality and Its Movements	209
	References	216





The residential estate Provenzal del Bosque.





The self-built settlement Colonia Antorcha.



The highway and country road.





The urban development (*fraccionamiento*) Sierra Hermosa.





Introduction

This book aims at rethinking the becoming of cities from the perspective of their corporeal making. It does so by delving into the thick of urban living in Mexico City, uncovering the everyday, infrastructural practices of self-made urbanites when building their houses, creating jobs on the street and forging and riding opportunities through space and time, in short, when making their living and their city with what they have at hand. We encounter this inventiveness of city-making on quiet neighbourhood streets in extensive housing estates, on the dusty building sites of self-help community organisations, and on the highways that tie these, and other, locations together and into the region of an urban-urbanising realm. As we meet the everyday makers of city from these sites it will become apparent how corporeal practice constitutes the urban, how it sediments into material form, produces and adapts houses and, in all of this, grows the life-bearing and life-creating infrastructure of the process we call city. This I describe as *dwelling urbanism*, as the making of city in corporeal practice, which entails also a specific knowing of the city, one that can be captured by the verb *citying*, rooted in consequential socio-material making.

Inside Urban Becoming

Víctor and I meet at one of the streets to the rear of the Sierra Hermosa development located in Tecámac, State of Mexico, in the northern stretch of the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico (ZMVM). He is selling fruit and vegetables from the back of his van, attending a few customers and waiting a little while before packing everything up again in order to move on. “This neighbourhood is only about seven years old,” he tells me in a moment of rest. “Here, neighbourhoods grow very fast.” Our eyes pass over the row of houses that mark the limit of the development and out onto the fields and other estates and emerging settlements at the distance. Surely, what characterises the urbanising realm of Mexico City is its uneven spatial development as well

as the extraordinary pace of this transformation: the area we are overlooking in 2010 will be covered by the building works of the new residential estate Provenzal del Bosque only a year later, partially inhabited after two years and ‘finished’ – if that can ever be said to be possible – with its approximately 3,000 dwelling units in 2014. In other words, what Víctor and I are witnessing at the very beginning of the research for this book speaks both of an urban becoming, and of the centrality of this becoming to the wider urban process: it is precisely here that global urbanisation materialises in the form of ever more houses, neighbourhoods and streets that will inevitably shape things to come on our planet. This is why the multiplicity and swift changes of the socio-material conditions that Víctor and I behold in this scene are the first ground on which this book unfolds.

The second ground is laid by considering Víctor’s work as a one-man mobile grocery shop. Víctor has found a way of turning the peripheral position of the neighbourhood – and his own position and mobility within it – into a business idea, providing what is missing on a makeshift basis. The way he came to his work, he tells me, was by searching for opportunities with, and within, what he had at hand: “There are no jobs here. So you have to look for a way to make one, you have to be creative in your searching [*hay que buscarle*].” This searching by doing is a key inventive practice when it comes to making ends meet in contexts of urban becoming. What Víctor found was how to introduce himself into the situation as the means by which to respond to its structural deficiencies. Now he employs himself as infrastructure, as a live/living infrastructure by which he participates in rolling out and sustaining the *city-in-becoming*. It is for this kind of engagement that AbdouMaliq Simone (2004b, 410–11) introduces the notion of “people as infrastructure”, to describe a making of city in terms of *cityness*, that is, in terms of an active and immediate making of consequential conjunctions (see Simone 2010; Sassen 2010). At the same time, I propose shifting the focus even further, thus taking into view not only people *as* infrastructure but their precise *doing* in infrastructural ways, as a verb. This is because I argue that particular attention needs to be paid to the *body at work* when enacting itself in infrastructural ways, bringing into focus both the *corporeal labour* that

infrastructural practice implies and how the making of cities is essentially a practice of *citying*.

The third ground of this book becomes apparent in the questions that Víctor and I pose ourselves while contemplating the material and social becoming of the city – becoming both around us and through our actions. What understanding of city is there to be derived from Víctor's particular emplacement and intervention in the unfolding space and time of Mexico City? In the following I will argue that turning to infrastructural corporeal practices allows rethinking urban becoming from the viewpoint of those *living in and with* its social and material circumstances. Urbanising environments, then, come into view not as crisis or problem but as the *matter* (material ground and concern) of life lived – a perspective that can help to address the critical questions that planetary urbanisation poses not only to the prospect of cities but also to how we make sense of them. The way we see cities relates directly to how we allow ourselves to address them with policies and actions, as David Harvey (1996, 38) has asserted; yet seeing cities with the eyes of those who, on the basis of daily practice, participate directly in their becoming still poses significant challenges to governance and planning. How do people see and feel the city when making it with and through their bodies? Seeing cities through the lens of their corporeal making contributes to this discussion by introducing what I call *dwelling urbanism*; a notion I derive from the anthropological perspective of dwelling Tim Ingold (2000) uses to frame the world-making engagement of human beings in and with their environment.

Making and Thinking City Through Infrastructural Practice

Rethinking the urban through corporeal city-making entails the need to closely review the practices that we can speak of with regard to their capacity to make city. This is why I commence my argument by turning to the notion of *doing infrastructure*.

Infrastructures, both physical and practised, are key to describing the working of cities and their sociality, exerting and channelling movements of all kinds (see Simone 2015, 375–76). They are also key to what it means to make

a living in cities, which becomes particularly apparent under those conditions characterised by a lack of physical components, as is the case in urban peripheries (see Amin 2014, 143). In this light, practising oneself as infrastructure, I argue, is an important means by which dwellers of urban-urbanising lifeworlds *make centrality* by making connections. By inserting their own movement into the movement of others, as Simone puts it, people engage in “incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections”. This is how cities are made through direct engagement with the social and material constituents of the environment. Highlighting the corporeality *at work* in such making, the findings in this book describe three types of *infrastructural city-making labour*. These are a labour of conjunction, a labour of presence and a labour of travel.

Beyond the local, turning to infrastructural corporeal practices also responds to contemporary processes that impact on social relations far beyond the context of urban-urbanising Mexico. Arguably, what people accomplish on the streets of this and other cities in Latin America and the global South is at the forefront of a global condition of uncertainty. Fritz Böhle and Margit Weirich (2010, 14), for example, point to how social actors who face a condition of advancing individualisation, when social institutions “lose their action-guiding and problem-solving power” and “cognitive planning reaches its limits”, increasingly need to accomplish their integration into society *on their own*; and in doing so, the authors continue, individual subjects increasingly rely on employing their “ability to establish fluid orders based on the body” (own translation). From this perspective, individual corporeal practice in general acquires infrastructural qualities and becomes a key resource for dealing with “uncertainty, ambiguity and insecurity” (ibid., 11, own translation),¹ far beyond any urban context or the particular urbanising context of this book.

At the same time, Elmar Altvater (2005, 54) discusses infrastructural practices – albeit by shifting the focus towards the notion of the informal and without engaging with corporeality – as the violent “expression of structural adjustment to global market forces”. He reveals informalisation to be a global project of governmentality that makes people circumvent manmade

constraints in order not to be excluded from society (ibid.; see also Altvater and Mahnkopf 2003). Critically engaging with informality and with the entanglement of the formal and the informal, therefore, remains a recurrent theme in the analysis of infrastructural corporeal practices, and is picked up throughout the book.

Last but not least, I argue that infrastructural corporeal practice also entails a particular way of *thinking* space and the city. I do so by drawing on Paul Carter's notion of "material thinking" (2004) by which he describes a coming to know the world rooted in the body and accomplished by handling the world's materials in practice. City-thinking, too, is a practice of the body, a coming to know with one's hands and feet of the position and fields of action and possibility one has within the wider urban context. As mentioned already in the encounter with Víctor, this perspective on cities apprehends them in light of their *cityness*, that is, on the ground of people's own corporeal making of consequential connections.

This notion of cityness, finally, is mobilised predominantly as an analytical category in, or associated with, the global South.² It is explicitly regarded as depicting what the Western notion of urbanity has difficulty seeing (Sassen 2010, 14) – or, for that matter, what Western urban theory (and politics) rejects seeing because it haunts its attempts to regulate the unruly unfolding of social space (Simone 2010, 3, 8). Bringing cityness into view can therefore be understood also as a project of "cognitive justice" in the sense proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2013, 731–32; 2014), that is, as bringing to the fore those epistemologies that have been systematically suppressed. Likewise, turning to cityness contributes to a global project of theory production that fosters "disrupting the narrow vision of a (still) somewhat imperialist approach to cities" in which cities of the global South are kept outside the rubric of those cities in which theory is built (Robinson 2002, 532). Turning to infrastructural practices of urban becoming in the global South, and addressing their achievements not as some kind of "not yet cities" (ibid.) but, instead, as *ordinary* (Robinson 2006) ways of doing city, of *citying*, can contribute to understanding how city dwellers worldwide make and think city in corporeal practice.

Outline of Chapters

Following this brief introduction, chapter 1 sets out the theoretical foundations for the arguments of this book. It asks how to address the city through practice, and its inhabitants as the practitioners of their own and the city's urban becoming. This comprises turning to inventive urban practices, reconsidering the notion of informality and introducing the conceptions of *people as infrastructure* and *cityness*. The chapter furthermore dedicates attention to the basic elements of practice theory, body space and the role of materiality and corporeality in both. It closes by discussing the particular *dwelling perspective* that is grown through making, and the thinking that arises from handling materials in practice.

Chapter 2 explores how to make sense of cities in light of ongoing urbanisation and of the wholesale transformation of the planet that this urbanisation entails. The chapter foregrounds the importance that lies in turning to urban peripheries as decisive spaces of urban becoming, engages with the history of making sense of such urban-urbanising territories and explores the theoretical ground on which to shift the perspective from city to citying. The chapter introduces the case study sites and provides the rationale for their selection. The book takes Mexico City, and above all its north-north-eastern peri-urban realm, as the starting point for the discussion. In this environment of urban becoming the subtle ways of making-do by which people forge themselves and the city are not only strongly present but are also highly visible in the emerging social and material urbanising space-time. In addition, chapter 2 outlines the mix of methods employed for this research. Cities are surely *made by people* – but how can we actually reveal this in analytical ways and bring into view the corporeal-material implications of such city-making? To answer this question I briefly elaborate on the significance of visual, sensory and creative research as methods that resonate both with studying the corporeality of practice and with doing so *inside* the urban socio-material (urbanising) world.

Chapter 3 is the first of three empirical chapters. In it I follow self-employed practitioners of the streets into their ways of forging opportunities out of their local social and material circumstances. From street-vending to on-site

recycling, the employed practices of these self-made (informal) businessmen and women are interrogated with regard to how they come to make and think city through particular forms of what I call a *labour of conjunction*. In this chapter we meet Doña Margo converting a former bus stand, her time, herself, her family and her neighbourhood into the resources of her business. We meet Ivan forging opportunities with his working body out of the rubble heaped up by execution errors in the (formal) production of housing. And we accompany Eduardo and his wife in handling movement at their juice stand in order to move along with the changing movements of their neighbourhood. Last but not least we meet Margarita as she shoulders all alone the risks of infrastructural practice, which reminds us of the hardship that living with uncertainty can also entail.

Chapter 4 turns the attention to the maker-residents of progressive houses that are either self-built or self-adapted to personal as well as collective needs. Again, this making of houses is interrogated with regard to the labour it implies, that is, with regard to a *labour of presence* that describes a second aspect of the corporal practice that lies in city-making. In particular, this chapter visits the case of the restaurateur Santa who employs her house as the active infrastructure by which to enact her infrastructural self. It also engages with the city-making labours accomplished by the settlers of the informal settlement Colonia Antorcha. These settlers not only have to build their houses and the streets of their neighbourhood with their own hands, and to demand the provision of urban infrastructure in collective demonstrations, but need to secure also their right to stay and to remain part of the group by making sure that their names and plot numbers are registered correctly and stay on ephemeral registration lists over time – an activity which I call *paper-work* and which in itself is accomplished only by the laborious work of the present body while, at the same time, allowing the social movement organisation Antorcha to keep its members in place by establishing the rule of a permanent state of uncertainty.

The last of the empirical chapters, chapter 5, turns to the road, directing its attention to practices related to commuting and to socio-materially enacting the highway as actually commutable. In this chapter, different expressions of