Aspirations in Grey Space:

Neighbourhood Governance in Nepal and Jordan

Abstract

The discipline of geography struggles to engage with urban futures on terms that are meaningful to the world's urban majority. This paper reflects the need to open up empirically grounded dialogue on aspirations and their complex connections to perceptions of possibility and temporality. Drawing upon research carried out in two overlooked by research, medium-sized cities (Bharatpur, Nepal; Zarqa, Jordan), this paper speaks back to contemporary discourse surrounding urban life and futurity. These two projects explore aspirations located within people's everyday attempts to secure urban presents and carve out spaces for the immediate future within the realm of their control. Urban futures, it is argued, need to be imagined from the perspective of the communities experiencing the complexities and uncertainties of the urban present firsthand, and who tailor their aspirations and expectations accordingly. In both Bharatpur and Zarqa, 'grey space' proves successful in framing the roles of influence, control, and management of power in determining possibility. In Bharatpur, residents learned that only by working together in neighbourhood groups could they begin to influence the local authority to provide certain aspects of physical infrastructure – the paved roads that residents had particularly aspired for. In Zarqa, residents turn to a variety of formal channels – political and developmental - in their attempts to reverse locally manifesting urban decay and provide much needed green spaces for the local community. In both contexts, these local, collectively-held aspirations are deeply linked to local perceptions of possibility, which in turn are a direct result of governance structures seeking to maintain particular urban relations and to control the pace and space of urban development.

6 key words: Nepal, Jordan, Aspirations, Grey Space, Urban Governance, Neighbourhood

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1. "Current debate falls short of grasping the urban future because it fails to capture what the city actually is, either on its own terms or in terms that are meaningful to the people who live within it" (Barac, 2013, p. 39).

2. INTRODUCTION

This paper speaks to the imperfect and often unsettling process of attempting to frame the experiences, practices and aspirations of research informants within human geography discourse. Arising from a debate among early career geographers working in cities in Jordan, Nepal, Pakistan and Tunisia, the paper turns to the aspirations articulated by specific urban communities to address one particular shortcoming of geographical debate, namely its struggle to engage with urban futures on terms that are meaningful to the world's urban majorities. Discourses of development, risk and planning are insufficient in capturing aspirations and possible futures in the city, instead relying on externally imposed visions of urban futurity that include problematic assumptions about temporality and need.

This paper reflects the necessity to open up empirically grounded dialogue on aspirations and their complex connections to perceptions of possibility and temporality, and draws upon research carried out in two regional, medium-sized cities: Bharatpur, Nepal, and Zarqa, Jordan. These two projects explore aspirations not as neatly articulated "future plans", but as located within people's everyday attempts to secure urban presents and carve out spaces for the immediate future.

Urban futures, it is argued, need to be imagined from the perspective of the communities experiencing the complexities and uncertainties of the urban present, and who tailor their aspirations and expectations accordingly. This paper explores the collective aspirations of these two communities through the dynamics of "grey space" (Yiftachel, 2009) and people's attempts to "rework" (Katz, 2004) the complex and uncertain urban present.

3. ASPIRATIONS AND THE CITY

Writing about contemporary human geography research, Bunnell et al. argue that insufficient attention has been given "to how future is engaged with as part of people's everyday lives and cultural imaginaries" (2018, p. 36). Part of the problem in finding a vocabulary to articulate how people aspire to live their urban lives lies within what Bunnell et al. call the "realms of expert calculation" (2018, p. 48), wherein possible futures are prescribed to cities based on risk assessments and resilience scenarios, rather than reflecting the heterogeneity of present-day urban experience from the perspective of urban residents. Zeiderman aptly remarks that "government planners, engineers, architects and social workers do not always share the timescales and temporal framings of those they are responsible for governing" (2016, p. 191). The 'developmentalist mindset' (Pieterse, 2013) that accompanies such calculated knowledge making does not adequately reflect the realities of much of the global urban South.

To counteract this developmentalist trend, Appadurai argues for the need to replace an "ethics of probability" with an "ethics of possibility"; engaging with people's aspirations and everyday ways of constructing scenarios for diverse futures (2013, p.

295). The "capacity to aspire", Appadurai argues, is positioned within a particular cultural system of norms and ideas, yet often emerges as "specific wants and choices", easily assumed to be individual and idiosyncratic, and belonging to a general notion of "the good life" (2004, p. 68). For Appadurai, the capacity to aspire thrives "on practice, repetition, explanation, conjecture and refutation" (2004, p. 69). In other words, aspirations require a 'navigational capacity' that is largely dependent on access and exposure to various networks, opportunities and possibilities.

Abdoumaliq Simone has advanced the concept of aspirations for urban majorities[1], opening up a dedicated space for researchers to attune themselves to locally-held aspirations, even when the capacity to aspire is severely curtailed by the political, economic and social structures of the city. Foregoing Appadurai's focus on aspirations as cultural capacity, Simone understands the city as a site "where individuals can hedge their bets, pursue disparate, even contradictory, aspirations, and fashion different ways both to recognize themselves and support these multiple recognitions" (2008, p. 201). In a piece titled *The Politics of the Possible,* Simone views the agency of urban majorities in relation to attempts "to construct the conditions that enable the city to act as a flexible resource for the viable organisation of their everyday lives" (2008, p. 186). For the urban majority, aspirations are built into everyday practices outside of formal channels, aspiring for a more equal footing while maintaining their capacity to navigate an ever-changing city (Simone, 2015).

Collectively, the works of Appadurai and Simone direct us towards an examination of aspirations in the city and how they relate to perceptions of possibility. In this paper

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[1] Those considered 'upper poor', 'working class', and 'lower middle class' (Simone, 2014)

we argue that the subject of aspirations needs to be more explicitly situated within the formal urban contexts that frame and shape these aspirations, and require sustained efforts to navigate and negotiate the urban present in the face of uncertainty and change over time. With this focus, we introduce and expand upon Yiftachel's concept of "grey space" (2009). Grey spaces are described as the "pseudo-permanent margins of today's urban regions" through which social relations are produced (2009, p. 250). Various methods of control, beyond simplistic dichotomies of approval/rejection, legality/illegality, permission/eviction, are deployed to maintain existing power relations, while somewhat paradoxically initiating new forms of mobilisation and possible resistance from those subjected to their deployment. In the context of aspirations in the city, grey space shifts the emphasis away from individual capabilities of securing urban futures and towards an understanding of the ways in which governance mechanisms shape the nature of aspirations, and affect the strategies communities undertake to achieve them. Grey space illuminates the often informal and subtle ways in which authorities stifle community engagement and urban development processes.

Replacing "navigational capacity" with Katz's concept of "reworking" provides a conceptual link between grey space and the agency of communities in pursuit of particular aspirations. Distinct from concepts of resilience (coping) and resistance (subversion), Katz understands reworking as processes of negotiation on terms and scales established by the hegemony (2004). In this sense, the ambiguities and uncertainties associated with grey space are conditions that communities encounter and are forced to negotiate under, often leading to unintended and unfavourable

outcomes. The capacity to aspire and to rework grey space, then, become important concepts for understanding urban possibilities amid changing urban processes.

By engaging with Yiftachel and Katz in this way, we are able to focus both on what we learned from our interlocuters about their own aspirations and, crucially, on the agents and processes responsible for defining the realms of possibility; the roles of influence, control, and the management of power in determining perceptions of possibility. The utility in Yiftachel's grey space concept lies in its respect for the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions of urban life that we encountered during our field research. Thinking about aspirations in relation to grey space reinforces an engagement with Katz's concept of reworking, to explore the contexts in which aspirations are conceived and worked upon. Grey space certainly requires a form of "navigational capacity", as Appadurai terms it, and provides a spatial dimension to our examination of aspirations and associated practices, repetitions, explanations, conjectures and refutations in the city.

4. RESEARCH CONTEXT

Speaking across two different empirical urban contexts, the paper strives to be cognisant of a need to expand the geographies of knowledge production on urban aspirations to incorporate habitually under represented, under researched medium-sized cities in the global South. While valuable work is being undertaken to address this imbalance, most notably perhaps by van Klinken and Berenschot in Indonesia (2014), the fact remains that these cities seem "removed from global or world cities networks", implying "the absence of any wider consequence or application" (Bunnell and Maringanti 2010, p. 417). When perceived through the same lens as larger

cities, scholars and urban specialists are imposing "substantial limitations on imagining or planning the futures of cities around the world" (Robinson, 2002, p. 531). We believe this to be particularly relevant to the question of aspirations, given the potential experiential differences of those living in smaller cities as opposed to larger, more globalised cities. By opening up dialogue between the articulations of aspirations of urban residents in different overlooked cities in South Asia and the Middle East, this paper seeks to add complexity to existing engagements with urban pasts, presents and futures.

The Bharatpur (Nepal) case study derives from a doctoral research project (Ruszczyk, 2017) exploring residents' coping and reworking mechanisms in the everyday and in response to specific events. Bharatpur is a regional city whose population doubled to 300,000 between November 2014 and November 2017. Four separate field visits were undertaken in the above time period. The Zarqa (Jordan) case study derives from a separate doctoral research project looking at the importance of place and locality in relation to diasporic subjectivity, taking Jana'a Neighbourhood as its field site; a low-income, "informal" settlement in Zarqa, inhabited predominantly by Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin. The observations and interactions presented below took place over two separate field visits between June and October 2018. In Bharatpur and Zarqa, people formulate aspirations at the scale within which they perceive that change is possible. The sections that follow focus on aspirations at the neighbourhood level, highlighting how demands for improved urban infrastructures require a negotiation of multiple grey spaces. Collective organisation is deemed necessary in both cases to rework the urban

present, which is designed and managed in a way that places undue limitations on possibility for the neighbourhood residents.

5. GREY SPACING NEIGHBOUHROOD GROUPS IN BHARATPUR

In 2011, an International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) established five neighbourhood groups – otherwise known as Tole Level Organisations (TLOs) – as well as several women's groups in the Nepalese city of Bharatpur. For the first time, the "slum residents" that lived in these peripheral neighbourhoods were provided with an informal, institutional connection to the municipal authorities. Prem, a high caste Brahmin and security guard at a private hospital in the city, moved to one such neighbourhood twenty years ago, and today resides on a small plot of land with his wife Laxmi. The neighbourhood centres around Forest Road; a dirt track bordering the community forest of Ward 11, with poor access to electricity and water supplies. Due to the lack of access to physical infrastructure such as paved roads, as well as regular access to electricity and water, the community self-identifies as "backward". Most residents are financially poor and, unlike Prem, many belong to ethnic groups and this prevents them from working as anything other than day wage labourers.

The creation of the Forest Road TLO provided Prem and fellow members with valuable resources for improving their local community. One TLO leader told me that the INGO project enabled residents to learn "the ways to access support" from the local authority; what residents can informally ask for, and what residents need to contribute to secure funding for infrastructure projects. It soon emerged that the local authorities had agreed to pave roads across the city, on the condition that the informal TLO was able to co-finance 30% of the costs. This had not been a formally-

declared policy, and only became known to Prem and others due to the existence of the TLO arrangement itself. One middle-ranking municipal official explained, "the Municipality will not listen to people regarding infrastructure needs unless the needs are articulated by a TLO to the ward and Municipality". On receipt of this information, Prem's TLO mobilised in pursuit of the funds required for the paving of Forest Road. This, rather than improved water or electricity infrastructures, became the focus of local collective action. Prem told me, "we need our dirt road paved. This is what we hope for and work towards". Of the ten TLOs interviewed as part of this research, all expressed a specific interest in securing paved roads for their area, often above all other forms of urban infrastructure. It seemed that this particular aspiration was intrinsically linked to a widely-held perception that residents could bring about this change for their communities; they had a sense of control and influence over road improvements that was lacking for other forms of development. Informal organisation, collective action and collective aspirations appeared key to securing positive change for these otherwise peripheral communities.

Local authorities in Nepal are cash poor and lack sufficient human resources. They also do not communicate with all residents in an equal manner. According to my interviews with residents in different parts of the city, many communities have not received word of the co-financing infrastructure scheme nor the necessity to seek road improvements through the informal TLO channels. Even where TLOs exist, the local authority does not always make them aware of a potential way forward. In this instance, urban development is conducted in a grey space, where municipal policy is ambiguous and public information is not forthcoming. The local authority therefore maintains control over the road construction process, sharing information for the

benefit of some while others are deprived of the chance to see their aspirations realised.

In parallel to the INGO-initiated TLOs, affluent high caste newcomers began to establish their own informal TLOs. These groups have proved very successful at securing infrastructural development, by understanding how to rework the grey space of governance to meet their needs. Narayan, an affluent high caste Brahmin shopkeeper and married father of two young boys, migrated to Bharatpur in 2013. He lives on the border of Ward 10 and Ward 11. He explains:

> Our TLO is two years old. There are 100 households in the TLO. It was started in order to make a link to the ward secretary and local authority. People group themselves so they could talk to the local authority about physical infrastructure. The TLO also works for [environmental] cleanliness and supports people in need.

Narayan's TLO has been able to fulfil its collective aspiration for a paved road. Narayan's newly created TLO knew that they needed to collectively organise, and connections based on caste and affluence proved vital in the successful negotiation of the grey space controlled by the local authority. Informal social networks, and particularly that include politicians and municipal officials, prove invaluable in securing improvements to neighbourhood infrastructure, and in a timelier manner than in the case of Prem and the Forest Road TLO. Prem's community has mobilised most but not all of the financial resources required, and is still waiting for their paved road.

By creating and functioning in a grey space of governance, the local authorities not only undermine residents who are not organised into TLOs, but they also undermine poorer and/or ethnic TLOs and their collective claim making. The local authority impacts residents' ability to negotiate and realise aspirations for present and future urban lives. The Nepali government is not quietly tolerating informality, rather it is actively striving to keep the neighbourhood groups in a grey space of governance. Grey spacing the TLOs serves its purpose: the government can further its agenda of providing services to those who it deems worthy of visibility, based on social and economic status. According to a mid-level municipal official, this can be achieved without needing to formalise these arrangements.

In spite of the tensions mentioned above related to governance of the grey space, several representatives of the poorer and ethnic TLOs in Ward 11 are apprehensive regarding the possibility of the Municipality disengaging entirely with TLOs at the government's discretion. This is due to the changing landscape in Bharatpur. Rural communities have been amalgamated into the newly created sub-metropolitan city of Bharatpur. It is unclear what this will mean for the city's TLOs who are conscious of how important the link to the Municipality is as well as how precarious and tenuous the link is at the present time. A senior municipal representative explains that the "Municipality is not under obligation to engage with the TLOs and in the future it is unclear how the government will work with them."

The grey space of municipal governance dictates that some but not all TLOs have the capacity to rework the urban present and formally engage with authorities on matters of urban development. The explicit control of grey space, and the lack of

formalisation for TLOs, means that this process is uneven and ambiguous, and likely to unravel further in the future. While roads are as important as ever for these communities, residents like Prem must continue to adapt to these new dynamics, with the odds stacked against them.

6. GREY SPACING LAND AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN ZARQA

"Now this", Taisir announced suddenly, calling us both to a halt, "is Rusaan Square." Having walked towards Jana'a's main commercial street through narrow, shaded alleyways typical of an informal neighbourhood, it was surprising to open on to a vast, open space amid such high urban density; flanked on all sides by three- and four-story concrete housing. "Since the beginning of Jana'a, we were told this land belonged to Majid Rusaan," an army official who supplied water to houses and agricultural land in Jana'a. "It was only recently we found out this land has always belonged to the *Baladiya* [Municipality], and so finally the *Baladiya* fulfilled our request for the square to be asphalted."

Asphalting what had previously been urban wasteland in the middle of Jana'a, one of Zarqa's poorest and most overcrowded neighbourhoods, was exactly the kind of modest, small-scale intervention the Jana'a Neighbourhood Committee (est. 2012) had been set up to force onto the Municipality's agenda. Not since the 1990s had residents felt they had a municipality that worked for the benefit of the people. Increasing municipal debt, corruption, and the prioritisation of lands belonging to families of the Beni Hassan tribe, were all seen as contributing factors. It was hoped that establishing the Committee would open a new channel of communication between residents and the Municipality, strengthening the hand of the former by

showing commitment to- and respect for formal, urban, political process. Rusaan square was a particular source of pride for the Committee one of its first accomplishments and a symbol of local, aspirational fulfilment. Once asphalted, the square became a space for children to play and for residents to park cars. In winter, rainwater would run off the asphalt, travelling down the gently sloping neighbourhood less contaminated with dust and debris than had previously been the case.

The ambiguous ownership status of Rusaan square was not an anomaly of the urban system in Jana'a. In a recent eviction case, approximately 700 families were accused of illegal settlement since their arrival in Jana'a in the aftermath of the 1948-9 *al-Nakba*. Having signed *hujja* agreements in the 1950s and paid municipal building tax payments (*musaqafat*) on a continuous basis, residents had largely been unaware of their supposed illegality. The fact that the Municipality had profited from *musaqafat* payments in spite of ambiguous settlement was not lost on the community. Taisir also showed me a number of disjointed wastelands close to the city's polluted river-turned-stream, which were themselves of questionable ownership status. The Municipality itself could not determine whether they or the Army owned the land. From the Municipality's perspective, the uncertainty meant any request from the community had to be rejected, until they could be more certain. Ambiguity served as a key control mechanism through which local authorities could manage and subvert the localised aspirations of community residents and representatives.

Throughout my interactions with residents, their aspirations typically remained fixed at the local level, formed around specific issues that signalled ongoing and unwelcome urban decay; parks either abandoned or destroyed, streets insufficiently

cleaned, problems with waste collection, and old buildings at risk of collapse. Aside from ambiguous land tenure arrangements, local authorities also pointed to tight budgets and a lack of resources as semi-permanent restrictions on project implementation. Some Committee members expressed a concern that the Municipality had actively orchestrated a split in their neighbourhood organisation, co-opting its then leader as well as a particularly influential younger member, who had developed a friendship with the Mayor and had been offered a commercial property for his brother around the time of his resignation from the Committee. Ever since the split, the Municipality were dismissive of the Committee's proposed interventions, stating that the organisation no longer represented the majority of residents in Jana'a. Grey space was serving its purpose; allowing residents to organise and voice their concerns without any corresponding institutional obligation for authorities to respond in any meaningful sense. For many residents, this grey space was typified by an absence of government altogether: "there is no *Baladiya*" would become a common trope in my conversations around Jana'a.

Grey space is made visible not only through attempts of residents to influence it and of local government to control it, but also through the limitations imposed on INGO interventions. With notable exceptions,[2] residents had learned to be sceptical of INGO practitioners, due primarily to the fact that local aspirations were often marginalised by a development scene constantly in flux, yet always bound to externally-set agendas and institutional processes that succeeded in silencing residents. 70,000 JD ($100,000) had once been pledged for a recreational park in one of aforementioned sites by the river, but the Municipality had decided the land needed to be kept clear for an unspecified future need. As part of a restoration

project for Zarqa river, a separate plan for a nearby park was made public by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 2009 and has yet to materialise. While a new plan emerged in June 2018 for the same park, led by German development agency GIZ, it soon became evident that practitioners were unwilling to meet residents until after the memorandum of understanding between donors and local officials had been signed, and a design team selected. With little to no say over the project's timeline, objectives or procedural arrangements, residents were focusing their attentions elsewhere.

To function within the grey space and allow them more direct access to international development funds, the Committee began seeking civil society organisation (CSO) registration with the Ministry of Social Development in September 2018. "The Jana'a Charitable Organisation" planned to open premises for community use, particularly for women and children. Seeming to offer more opportunity for the realization of aspirations than other existing institutional processes, the Committee showed enthusiasm at the prospect and a number of residents had already offered up premises for them. Yet it remains unclear whether CSO status will be granted, as prospects for CSOs in Jordan are increasingly precarious: the Ministry of Social Development is concerned that CSO funding arrangements are difficult to control, regulate and oversee[3]. Nevertheless, residents remain acutely aware of the ways in which the urban present undermines their aspirations, and the Committee remains committed to the fulfilment of localised aspirations through access to formal, urban processes, however uncertain or unfruitful they appear to be.

7. PERCEPTIONS OF POSSIBILITY

What is possible in the city has a profound impact on people's aspirations and the strategies they pursue in order to achieve them. Within these constraints, these two communities (in Bharatpur Nepal and Zarqa, Jordan) are acutely aware of the options available to them in order meet their needs and live up to their own perceptions of progress. The residents are also committed to practices of reworking the grey spaces that dominate their interactions with local authorities. While certain actions create space for the realms of possibility and spheres of influence to be expanded (i.e., the creation of neighbourhood groups and organisations), the dynamics of grey space are such that local authorities can manage these interventions and limit or manipulate them in various ways to suit a range of interests. Grey space proves an important concept through which to consider aspirations in the city, directing us towards the contextually-specific and often ambivalent spaces that characterise the relationship between urban authorities and urban dwellers. Our research highlighted collectively - held aspirations that are specific, pragmatic and formed around the desire to see tangible improvement in their local area.

Aspirations in these two cases are geared towards the immediate future and a modest imagining of that future. Paved roads in Bharatpur serve a clear, basic purpose, and are deemed sufficient markers of residents' participation in Nepal's transition to a modern urban future. Residents in Jana'a, Zarqa are similarly concerned with small-scale interventions, in this case not in relation to a national "urbanisation project" but in an attempt to reverse a period of slow, urban decline. These local aspirations for short-term improvement are specific, but not removed from broader, urban temporalities. Spaces of urban possibility have been shown here

to be constitutive of an evolving relationship between urban residents, authorities, and at times, various third parties. Although Simone (2008) may be correct in guiding us towards people's attempts to make the city a flexible resource for everyday urban navigation, we must pay attention to the stubbornness and permanence of urban grey spaces and their impact on aspiration and collective action.

The two case studies suggest that "progress" and "development", whatever form they may take, are more easily imagined at the local level, and subsequently aspirations have local, imagined manifestations that cannot be known without speaking directly to communities. We question the extent to which government officials, development practitioners, urban planners and geographers are aware of the aspirations of the world's urban majorities and importantly, are willing to engage on this level. It is not sufficient to propose or critique "formalistic policy models", or to examine the "brutal workings of neoliberal power" in the city (Pieterse, 2008, p. 130), or to presume heterogeneity and complexity without further engagement. Similarly, and in relation to aspirations, discourses of (post-) development and (post-) modernity are of limited worth when assessing particular urban futures. Instead, we feel it necessary to learn from our interlocuters, using their own framings and perceptions of possibility, to detail the regimes of control and influence that shape their aspirations and lead them down particular forms of political and social urban engagement.

8. CONCLUSION

While these two research projects were conducted independently, focusing on different aspects of urban life in the global South and engaging in different literatures

within urban and political geography, we were surprised at the extent to which aspirations took on similar forms and dynamics across the two case studies. This paper primarily derives from a shared dissatisfaction with limitations within urban geographical literature around the concept of aspiration, particularly on terms that are meaningful to the urban residents themselves, as alluded to in the opening quote from Barac.

Comparison and repeated visits to these two cities that have provided us with insight into how these local, neighbourhood organisations function in the wider urban context, and how collective aspirations are deeply connected to perceptions of possibility. We argue that geographical enquiries into urban futurity can and should imagine the city from the perspective of urban residents; how the complexities and uncertainties of the urban present are experienced first-hand, and how aspirations and mechanisms of reworking the urban present are tailored accordingly. This is also true for development practitioners, who can themselves easily get entangled within the grey space of urban governance. Finally, we argue that there is no better place to continue these lines of enquiry than in other provincial, medium-sized cities of the urban world.

9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[2] In 2018, USAID had funded the construction of a maternity and child healthcare facility in Jana'a, and co-funded a school project (with the National Democratic Institute) that had enabled a group of female students to end commercial river pollution in the area.

[3] Interview with anonymous source, 27th September 2018.