

Maximum exposure: Making sense in the background of extensive urbanization

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Abstract

Building upon notions of extended urbanization, the essay reflects on the sensory implications of what it means when urbanization becomes extensive, i.e. when decision-making is subject to a multiplicity of forces that make coherent narratives about what is taking place problematic, while “extending” an enlarged field of opportunities as well as constraints for individual livelihoods. As many residents of Jakarta provisionally settle in distant peripheries and eke out an uncertain endurance in urban core working class districts, while operating across larger swathes of territory in search of opportunity, increased reference is made to the background. This is not only a diffuse, uncertain object of residents’ attention but a strategic way of sensing how their everyday lives are being folded in to multiple disparate trajectories of urban remaking and a concrete terrain of operations. As such the essay, through an engagement with residents in one of Jakarta’s long existing working class districts, explores what it means to inhabit the processes rather than places of urbanization and how their experiments with new ways of being exposed to all that the city may posit opens up new itineraries for navigating the city, yet also holds together a sense of purpose and well-being.

Keywords

Extensive urbanization, popular sensibility, everyday practice, Jakarta

Extending the extended

In a region of now almost 31 million people, it is difficult to make any generalizations about the many different forces at work shaping everyday life in Jakarta. What is clear is that increasingly its residents are on the move and significantly reshape what it means to reside.

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This has become evident to me in tracing the trajectories of movement of associates with whom I have worked for a long period of time in the working class inner city districts of the city. As many of their lives are sometimes voluntarily and other times involuntarily upended, my concern has been with how they make sense of their conditions, of what they pay attention to in order to explain what is happening to them and to try to act decisively in accordance with those understandings.

Through the concept *extended urbanization*, Henri Lefebvre (1970/2003) sought to understand how urban processes replicated themselves across various landscapes, historical and socioeconomic situations. The conceptual conundrum was to identify how such processes entail a coherent series of maneuvers and logics without reifying the intensely malleable, shape-shifting ways in which urbanization articulates divergent trajectories of spatial production. The conundrum is how to point to specific ramifications of relational density—the tying together and coordination of accumulation, resource distribution, political regulation, population movement, and territorial development—without necessarily fixing these ramifications to predetermined conceptual frameworks of exposition; to allow unanticipated implications of urbanization to feed forward into new understandings (Buckley and Strauss, 2016).

Today, many urban residents are not quite sure how to understand such unanticipated implications. Many find themselves ensconced in landscapes at some remove from the urban cores, and whose compositions are a panoply of built environments, tended and fallow agricultural land, industrial estates, and wastelands. Discrepant land uses sit side by side in oscillating spirals of ascension and decline, where it is difficult to discern just where things are headed. Or, they remain situated in infrastructurally and socially overextended urban cores subject to intense speculation.

What I try to do in this essay is to explore one minor but important register through which these unanticipated implications of urbanization's extensive trajectories are addressed by residents in Jakarta that I have come to know over the past 12 years. While the forms of address vary greatly in terms of what residents actually do and the decisions they make about where to place themselves and in what ways, the essay hones in on a common refrain in their reflections, i.e. try to see things in a new way. In doing so it thinks about the how the urban sensorium is being changed in coincidence with changes in processes of urbanization; how such changes in sense are deployed strategically in order to facilitate more adaptive responses to these processes, thus building on work focused on the more cultural dimensions of urbanization's impact on human life (Merrifield, 2013; Millington, 2016; Pow, 2017). While the inhabitants of urban spaces have always been multiple in terms of composition and outlook, this contribution attempts to rework the very grounds where inhabitation takes place, to imagine new territories of inhabitation within the confines of more familiar designations, such as urban core and urban periphery.

So this essay will proceed to explore various ways in which current and former residents of a working class district of Jakarta, Menteng Dalam use the notion of a *background*, which is both something "out there" and which they, themselves compose, in order to create shifting views corresponding with changing dimensions of urban life. Here, background is not simply context or a cognitive construct, but is experienced as actual terrain, something which is engaged, navigated, and acted upon. It is staging area for individual initiatives, even if hard to put one's finger on, as it eludes clear definition in its continuously changing contours.

Notions of extended urbanization have largely focused on processes of spatial expansion and articulation and the profusion of operational landscapes, and the ways in which different kinds of landscapes and economies are sutured together. Here, I want to emphasize

that urbanization is also *extensive*, not only in the sense that it covers more ground or becomes an increasingly hegemonic modality of spatial and social production, but that it also incorporates a wide range of logics, social and cultural processes, and vernaculars, thus *exposing* residents to a larger set of factors at work in shaping their own daily experiences. Urbanization is extensive in that it interrelates all aspects of life that previously could be bounded, separated in space and time (Amin and Thrift, 2016; Lindón, 2019; Soja, 2005). As such, the notion of “extended” can also apply to the ways in which some residents extend their attentional fields beyond the immediacy of their daily work and residential situations to a larger, more encompassing imaging of the city and region in which their lives are ensconced. This is less a process of making reference to a genealogy of how urban change has taken place, less a process of telling stories of history or probable causation, but more a way of attending to things, of what the eye takes notice.

These reflections may not have a direct connection to our familiar understandings of extended urbanization (Keil, 2018; McGee and Greenberg, 1992; Monte-Mór, 2014; Schmid, 2018). But the concomitant movement of populations, and what many Jakartan residents refer to as an intensified sense of temporariness in terms of work and residence, as well as a deferral of fixed commitments to particular ways of inhabiting the city, are important aspects of the extended. While their lives may seem increasingly precarious, this precarity occasions sometime wide ranging efforts to manage insecurities of daily life that go beyond the problems of income alone (Han, 2018; Millar, 2018). These efforts appear to engender a sensibility that envisions a larger backdrop to the immediate details that consume everyday attentions. Like backdrops that are used in photography studios to frame the bodies being photographed, such sensibility seems to focus on how a background is repeatedly being composed and altered to include a wide range of elements that don't necessarily all fit together, that come and go, and change their juxtapositions in order to generate a particular affective “charge” to those sensibilities (Camp, 2012).

Just as in this act of photography, residents risk multiple exposures, that often can't be clearly separated or defined. Those that undertake new lives in the periphery are exposed to situations where there may be little in terms of institutional supports or urban services. There is the exposure that comes with concluding that one's familiar ways of managing daily affairs are insufficient, and that the present composition of family and friends may not be enough to keep up with things. Here, is the exposure to new circumstances over which one cannot exert much control. Itineraries of trying to engage new opportunities, new incomes, and new places of everyday operation expose residents to multiple contestations, power dynamics, and forms of authority that they only have limited understanding of or ways of dealing with. All around are those prepared to take advantage of their vulnerabilities, their desire for some sense of direction. But they also see others around them take inordinate risks to do something different with their lives, and sometimes the evidence that these risks indeed work. Here, exposure means being attuned to events and circumstances beyond one's normal routines and interests. So exposure is a multifaceted intersection of vulnerability and opportunity; it is a by-product of precarity but also a way of dealing with that precarity at the same time, and this doubleness of sense is embodied by the background.

This sense of exposure is also a way to handle time, keeping memories alive about what worked in the past, but that needs to find new expressions, but not too quickly, not with premature commitments. So, the details of their daily itineraries are viewed less as indicative of specifically defined futures that would suggest clear courses of action, based on what they knew from their prior residential situations, but entities still in motion, yet to be “settled” within any framework.

As such, these acts of imaging, of residents extending themselves into a larger domain of operations adds another dimension to a long history of classic work about how residents make sense of their spaces of inhabitation (De Certeau, 1984; Hansen and Verkaaik, 2009; Ingold, 2000; Sennett, 1994). All of these works have explored the important ways in which resident efforts to make sense of their conditions in turn contribute to how those conditions are structured, as well as, importantly, marking what is left out of any particular sense-making activity, what is not paid attention to or considered.

Repeatedly in conversations with residents I was told about considerations that they had neglected, and that I, too, was neglecting in my questions of them. Therefore in these endeavors to attain a wider backdrop, a more expansive sense of what is taking place “out there,” it is not that every resident has a similar and fixed sense of what they are seeking to pay attention to, but that they commonly refer to whatever it is as a *background*.

The reflections of the background here are grounded in a long tradition of investigations on urban cognition and the role of urban form in shaping human sensibilities. It builds on work that explores the ways in which the urban coming into form posits a range of affordances for human action (Harrison, 2000; Levine, 2014; Lynch, 1995), the ways in which form itself models specific cognitive capacities (Hillier, 2012; Portugali, 2004; Stern and Krakover, 1993) and the ways in which form itself embodies a kind of sense that actively interacts with the sensibilities of those that engage such form (Amin and Thrift, 2016; Thibaud, 2011). The essay attempts to extend this work to dimensions of the interrelationships between rapidly changing urban environments and strategic orientations on the part of residents attempting to attend to those changes that are not easily calculable or definitive, that do not produce clearly accountable changes in the dispositions of concrete household economies and lifestyles, but are yet acknowledged by residents as an important dimension of everyday living.

Shaping Jakarta's periphery

The emergent spatial composition of both Jakarta's urban core and expanding periphery reflects not only the heterogeneity of build forms and functions, as well as the repositories of land acquisitions, but a plurality of expropriation, accommodation, intransigence, and fungibility in shaping the urban landscape (Firman and Fahmi, 2017). At one level of course, land conversion remains the driver of local economies, and major Indonesian developers had banked large volumes of land at Jakarta's periphery over two decades ago. Most of this land has now been released, primarily for industrial projects, but also for new vertical housing complexes and cheaply constructed pavilion housing schemes (Hudalah et al., 2013). While land conversions have occurred at dizzying speeds there are also situations that barely change. These can be attributed to the interminable delays in adjudicating disputed land claims, the divergent agendas of different governmental jurisdictions, and the enduring cultivation of land to guarantee food supplies (Pribadi and Pauleit, 2015).

In some instances, former agricultural villages have retained access to cultivable land by constructing dormitory style housing for migrant industrial workers. Some become mostly the social reproduction appendages to large industrial estates, while others, alike in almost all other respects, develop their own small-scale production networks operating on subcontracts or producing cheap inputs for developing local entrepreneurship (Harini et al., 2012). Additionally the terrain is littered with seemingly failed projects scaled across different temporalities.

It is clear that different actors have been doing different things in these territories for decades, anticipating developments that never materialized or that substantially

overestimated or underestimated the character of economic and social changes underway. Management responsibilities for many developments change hands so quickly and so many times that it is often difficult to discern original expectations, and many are seemingly concerned about the present status of their assets, believing that eventually some profitable use will be made, and are thus willing to wait (Hudalah and Firman, 2012).

A significant contributing factor in the preponderance of uncertain trajectories is the inability of local governments to oversee and control land disposition. This is due to the high cost of technologies that enable the appropriate scalar mapping of territory, as well as overlapping and uncoordinated governmental jurisdictions as applied to land use and building permits (Rustiadi et al., 2015). The absence of coordination means that many heavily populated areas lack schools, health facilities, and other social institutions. In addition, many actors rush to introduce “facts on the ground” and then negotiate various forms of compensation for their circumvention of legalities.

The persistence of overlapping jurisdictions as well as substantial disjunctures among them also stems from the decentralization policies instituted by former President Suharto during the final years of the New Order Regime. While purportedly instituted to promote more efficient and accountable governance, the result has largely been a protracted period of competition in terms of attracting investment, developing infrastructure, and accelerating the conversion of land. Because of intensive and generalized competition, systematic spatial development plans and regional coordination have never reached fruition, nor have many of the projects undertaken by the different metropolitan and sub-regional governments. This contributes to the apparent disarray of the built environment and an increase of dissatisfaction among residents (Nordholt and Van Klinken, 2007; Ostwald et al., 2016; Rukmana, 2015). Additionally, major real estate developers, such as Ciputra, Podomoro, and Lippo Karawaci have wielded enormous power in developing major new towns, industrial estates, and commercial centers (Dieleman, 2011; Hudalah et al., 2013).

While many new residents in the peripheries find work in new industrial zones and their ancillary economies, or commute long distances to established jobs, many also are footloose. They search for new opportunities, but also frequently return to the very districts they left in attempts to resume former entrepreneurial activities—fabricating, hawking, repairing, delivering—or simply use their own neighborhoods as launching pads to scout out new sources of income across the central city and near-suburbs.

Malini, 50 years old, owned a fleet of small delivery trucks before a health crisis with her husband forced her to sell the business to a cousin and move to the outskirts of Bekasi. She returns to Menteng Dalam every day, with a combination of motorbike taxis, minivans, and trains that take two hours each way. Her former house was sold to a local developer three years back, but the plans to remove the house and put up a small hotel fell through, so she rents the house back from its new owner and has divided the place into 15 rooms to rent. She also cooks lunch from a small cart in front of her house to employees of a new medical clinic that has been built just up the block.

When asked whether she anticipates really ever feeling settled in her new home, she responds: “These days everyone needs a place to park, for what’s happening now is not going to last, so home for me is back in the village when I was girl. I only go once every few years and most everyone has now passed on, but otherwise I just have to have my “units” (places to put things, her husband and children).” “Ok, home is there, somewhere, maybe just in the background.”

So while a recognizable home is attributed to a village that barely exists for Malini, the “real” sense of home remains something yet to be discovered. She is sure that it is there, but what it looks like and where it will be located is something that remains unknown,

or perhaps more importantly, exists as something that need not have a definitive shape or location, but is able to exert its influence nonetheless. Here, the background becomes a key zone or domain of inhabitation, a place in which to reside, yet with only tenuous boundaries, something to be continuously pieced together. While the desire for stability may remain, what does it mean to be held in place, to have a position from which to speak and act, when things around you are shifting all of the time?

What do residents in Menteng Dalam mean when they talk about the background?

Many friends and associates with whom I have worked in the hardscrabble central city district of Menteng Dalam in Jakarta have relocated to the peripheral areas of Karawang, Cityam, Maja, and Cibadak, and frequently report being at a loss in their ability to tell coherent stories about where their lives are headed. Those that remain in the old working class districts of Jakarta do so with a sense of constant vulnerability and obligations to outtrick those that would seek to dispossess them, while playing host to short-term tenants and commercial operations, again, with a purported absence of clear story-lines. It is an exodus that leaves many spaces in suspension, in a prolonged emptiness over which constantly hovers all kinds of prospects that have yet to materialize. Residents are acutely aware of how easy it is for their aspirations and plans to be sabotaged.

The social sanctions and the deep sense of interdependency that once characterized Jakarta working class districts have been drawn upon too many times and subject to too many political manipulations that residents now tend to guard their initiatives lest they be hijacked by others. This awareness of subterfuge effects an economy of speech, as well, where clearly articulating what one intends to do and how is to be avoided, thus spurring on a growing atmosphere of dissimulation.

When I lived with my partner in the urban core district, Tebet, I chose to work in Menteng Dalam across the highway as it was close enough to avoid wasting time in interminable traffic but also far enough from my home to maintain some distance from the everyday politics of negotiating rights and responsibilities with my neighbors always curious about and testing of our presence there. In Menteng Dalam I had a ground floor office in a rooming house where I convened meetings with students from various Jakarta universities whose research projects on urban life I was helping to supervise. The door of the office opened out onto the street and so most of the time these meetings would take place outdoors and would, too, draw the curious attentions of neighbors and passers-by.

Menteng Dalam was a crowded district with alternating pavilion homes and small apartment blocks, markets, stores, mosques, workshops, and small factories. All were intertwined in a thick fabric that made distinctions between work and home, public and private, political and social difficult to maintain. The interwoven built environment and dense proximity of so many functions and activities generated social interrelationships that were at times intensely collaborative, replete with mutual support and solidarity and, at other times, manipulative, parasitic, individualistic, and contemptuous of rules and mores. A workable balance among these tendencies was always considered a significant accomplishment.

The sheer fact of having a small office to conduct gatherings within the midst of so many other gatherings that came and went was not an incidental matter that could be insulated from the surroundings. It meant always having to find ways to make these small meetings articulate themselves, for example, to the gatherings of small street retailers that would constitute a night market on a main thoroughfare around the corner, or the gathering of

laborers across the city constructing what was advertised as a small motel, but would actually become a series of unlicensed workshops. All kinds of local “authorities” would also need to be greeted on a regular basis and attention paid to their plans for the area, which seemed to change daily. So many local residents came to visit on a regular basis, particularly when a different constellation of students would appear, that we began to identify them as our “associates.”

While not unaware or uninterested in the workings of the city beyond Menteng Dalam, residents were intensely fixed on constantly responding to all of the initiatives undertaken in this place to do something different—build extensions, try out new businesses, repair streets, mobilize support for women’s prayer groups or mosque activities, or to multiply the number of makeshift factories in order to build up a reputation for particular kinds of economic productions or services.

After several years working in the district, however, more and more residents started moving away. It was clear that in the next district, Menteng Atas, major new roads were being built, that residents were being offered high prices to vacate their land for the extension of the high end commercial district of Kuningan and its shopping malls, hotels, and tower blocks. I had not heard of any major new developments on offer in Menteng Dalam, and so I was curious as to what was instigating residents’ moves outwards. They had been investing so long in continuous incremental changes that such moves seemed premature and imbued the local atmosphere with seemingly unnecessary tension and doubt.

Again, residents reminded me that I was neglecting important dimensions, that I was too enamored with what was taking place inside Dalam and that I should, like them, take a broader view. It wasn’t that they lacked confidence in their efforts to build viable lives here; it was more, according to them, a sense that Jakarta was expanding in so many directions, so rapidly, that they risked being left behind, that the “real action” was somewhere else, and that the amount of money, time, and effort spent in trying to make things happen in Dalam could be better deployed elsewhere. According to them Dalam had gotten too crowded, too complicated, too expensive, and too cutthroat.

As Wita, a 30-year-old textile worker put it, “I left Menteng Atas not only because of the increasingly high prices, but I needed to get out, find a cheap place to put my aging mother and kids, so I could better get around those places in Jakarta where things seem to be going on, where I could take up work without long commitment and move on to something else if I needed to.”

With the approximately 20 households I maintained contact with after they had relocated to the peripheries of Jakarta, they almost all indicated difficulties in providing accounts of what they thought their lives would be like from now on. Without coherent stories it would seem unlikely they would be able to make plans for the future, take decisive action about how and where to invest their time and energies. Yet in my conversations with them, though they hinted at increased levels of impetuosity or caution, few were unable to know what to do. This confidence was attributed to their paying attention to what they referred to in various ways as the *background*.

Instead of always having to try and come up with stories that foreground particular salient details and their meanings, they emphasized an always incipient patterning of the things that surround them, that which folds in everything *out there*. Here the meanings of details seem to fall away. The events, conditions, and things of their surrounds converge and blend into an always tentative form, a series of *strange* composites that then suggest different ways of thinking and feeling about the circumstances they face.

Take the following three vignettes:

As Fadli, a friend who moved to Karawang to take up factory work, proposes: “there are too many things going on, too many things to pay attention to, it feels like a crowded train where you are surrounded on all sides and you lose track of what’s out there, that they don’t want you to see, where everyone, no matter who they are, can turn this way or that and find themselves in a totally different life.”

Or as Budi, a long-time associate who lives in several make-shift houses across Jakarta indicates: “they (the local authorities) want to distract us from paying attention to what’s behind all of it, not like some secret but something that’s right there all of the time, where everything meets and not one things stands out more than any other.” “The lurah (the district boss) says we have to move, that big changes are coming, and so everyone jumps, rather than realizing that there is more out there than simply the developer and the government.” “We’re here, and our being here spreads out to reach a lot of this city and so we can be here in a lot of different ways.” “So it’s not that everything has its place, but everything is out of place all at the same time, so you have to slow down, not react to everything little thing that is thrown in front of you and then you can do most anything.”

Dina, a nurse living in Maja, remembers Menteng Dalam as place “for neighbors, even if you didn’t much like them, most anything you did they were part of the picture that you needed; now, I spend most of my days in trains and ancots (small buses) and I have no idea who my (present) neighbors are, yet wherever they are out there, those neighbors from the old place are with me all the time.”

In all of these accounts, there is the sense of something more out there to pay attention to, that attention is sometimes being intentionally diverted by special interests, or that sometimes regardless of where one finds themselves, the images of past relations can remain an active source of reference even if these relations are not actively tended to. In each case, something is outside the present field of attention, something that could quickly lead to another kind of life, if only it were paid attention to.

While other more immediate relations remain important—relations such as household and family obligations, the relationships between aspirations and viable attainments, between religious obligations and livelihood necessities, and relationships conducted through various social media—there was also a sense in my conversations with those who had left Dalam that there should be space for more open-ended relations. They believed that they shouldn’t get too tied down with particular sets of obligations or ways of doing things. With so many countervailing forces to contend with, these compositions of a background become the residents’ own force. As working class Jakarta residents once auto-constructed much of the built environment they inhabited, this relationship to a composed background becomes a more abstract, yet accessible continuation of such legacies, as the opportunities to self-build, alone or with others, are increasingly constrained. This is due to the waning of old solidarities, difficulties in finding land, and the profusion of new “affordable” housing developments.

As I attempted to shift my small office to the outskirts of Cityam, opening up a whole new series of conversations with migrant workers, elder farmers, motorbike taxi drivers, high school kids, real estate developers, and security guards, civil servants, and street brokers, what I heard repeatedly was that it is hard to tell where things are going. Thus, it is important to remain *exposed* to the multiplicity of elements, to hedge one’s bets so that it is possible to concretely navigate uncertain terrain. The message was: don’t act too quickly, don’t make too many commitments, and try to pay attention to all of the different events happening around you. Then you will understand where you are.

What I construe from all of these invocations of the *background* then is alternating reference to something “out there” that yet remains to be crystalized as a specific image, event, or infrastructure. But it is also something intimate, within one’s own capacities to put together. As Didi puts it, “Jakarta is still trying to put together the big story about itself.” “You can’t really read what it is yet, but you see it being put together out there; it may not ever happen because, you see, Jakarta doesn’t really have one place anymore.” “So it’s up to you to give it one.”

The background is also an affordance. By virtue of attending, or being exposed to that which goes beyond the immediate scenes in front of you or the images of a discernible horizon, the observer is granted a view upon the city that is able to bring places, actors, and events together that are otherwise left apart.

So in its *basic sense*, the *background* combines a *willingness* to suspend the judgment that what you see is what things are, an *acknowledgement* that beyond the immediacy of a person’s context that there is a field of vision that can be grasped *and* composed in excess of what is presented, and a *belief* that this willingness to see in a different way, a way that does not tie everything together into a coherent image, will enable the person to better navigate the ins and outs of everyday urban life. These processes of willingness, acknowledgement, and belief are then often crystalized into a particular working image—what we will soon see with a food hawker in Dalam who directs his gaze to a specific urban horizon and where political brokers refer to the details of the surroundings.

Less a matter of actively creating specific conditions, the background refers to the importance of being exposed, even if being exposed leaves a person vulnerable to unexpected or even undesirable changes. But this is the risk that residents often intend to take. Returning to Fadli: “I think that in all of my train rides across Jakarta, all of the things I have to do and all of things that I just end up doing for little reason at all, that I am being exposed to something I can’t quite talk about clearly, but I know it will change my life, and this is what I want.”

In the frequent reference to the *background*, I remembered that it was not something new, that I had heard it before during my work in Menteng Dalam. It was not used so much as now, but perhaps it was a concept that was there all along, rather as something incipient, something that residents were now carrying with them into new situations. But before “returning” to this history, first, a brief outline of what these new residential situations in Jakarta have been.

A story about Kadek and his background

I indicated before how I recalled the *background* being invoked by some in Menteng Dalam before residents started to leave. I remember one figure, Kadek, who first used this notion that now I hear repeatedly across Menteng Dalam and the peripheral districts to which many have moved. I went back to him to talk about this notion, and the following small story is based on our discussions together.

At 4 am Kadek, a food hawker wakes to prepare the soup he will sell on a not too distant corner in Kuningan. It is still dark, and the single lantern that he uses to complete his duties barely illuminates the immediate surrounds. Yet a background looms in its enormity—what he initially points to as a forest of tall buildings and highway overpasses, but then explains is something more than this. For a moment he is fixated on this scenography, paying attention to the blurry mixtures of shapes that in the pre-dawn refuse any clear definition. It is a background that he realizes he pays barely any attention to as he steers the cart along

surging morning traffic and once positioned must pay attention to lines of customers and potential shakedowns from police and brokers.

In one respect, Kadek realizes that his existence counts for very little against this background. He ekes out a meager living, still making payments on the cart he leases, still barely covering his monthly expenses. For him, however, the city remains full of possibilities. These are not abstract things for him; it is not a matter of vague hope, inflated expectations, or the stuff that fills countless stories. For Kadek these possibilities are etched onto the background. They are its detail, its form. As he, himself, indicates, it is a matter of “one thing leading to another,” of a “sudden turn” and a “faint, but noticeable glimmer.” When he looks at the background on this dawn, he sees the infrastructure of the possibility that he, too, can constitute his own sudden turn of events. There was a time last week when he inadvertently drove his cart into the middle of a wedding party and in the subsequent apologies somehow ended up responsible for delivering a very large order to a subsequent wedding taking place the following month. This was all attributed to discovering a new shortcut between home and work.

In this dawn, Kadek hurriedly talks about all the things he doesn't really think about otherwise in a day characterized by the repeated tempos of watching and waiting. He talks about how his neighbor sets off to factory work at the periphery and what he will talk about with his fellow workers at lunch; he talks about how his sister living at a far end of the city will exchange brief intimacies with the women in the prison to whom she dishes out a quick cafeteria lunch; he talks about how his former school friend will disperse the fake ID cards he obtains from the back door of a government distributor. Every day, different characters are involved. He has no empirical evidence for anything he says. He has never witnessed any of the activities he accounts for with great detail. Rather he construes all of these realities from the background he takes only a few moments to linger on in each morning's preparations. For as Kadek says, “if you try to look at everything at the same time without having to know for sure exactly what you are seeing, then, all of these events and activities become clear.”

For Kadek, then, the background renders the different dimensions of everyday life in a form where each implies the other. Each reaches into the other's own conceits of self-presentation, turns each inside out to manifest scenarios proceeding in every which way than the one you might have expected. This field of mutual implication makes sense in Jakarta, where homes pretend to be small factories, and small factories homes. Enterprises pretend to be civic associations and civic association enterprises.

The background is not a genealogy, even as genealogies are critical. It is not a story about how a city got to be the way it is, if even such a story were possible given the multiplicity of forces involved. It isn't a domain that collapses everything into some indistinguishable mush; it is not a black hole that pulls everything that exists in view into some inevitable voiding. Rather, we know that everything that appears draws upon a reserve of potential from sources that exceed the capacities of our attention, that operate on scales and within temporalities that exceed human cognitive capacities (Hansen, 2014).

The background invoked by my associates is not a guiding hand, destination, or ultimate explanation. It is something always besides them, right next to whatever or wherever they are, but somehow a perpetual exception to whatever rules they are playing by. It is something proximate, right next to them, but seemingly not of the same universe, even though it is not a parallel reality, for it is something fully participating in the reality that they acknowledge (McCormack, 2017). The background then always raises the question of what *might* be taking place, right now, right here that we could be aware of. At the same time, it is not a negation, it does not exist to undermine all that we know and assume, even

as it operates as a constant disruption of a prevailing sense. It does not acknowledge the centrality of any particular agent's actions. It uses our bodies and our tools. It shares our space, even while recomposing it as a different atmosphere.

Sensing a common world

When Kadek begins each day, he points out that he is not alone. There are hundreds like him preparing to steer their cart toward a destination. They may prepare different things to sell, have different arrangements with bosses and landlords, different destinations they switch up on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. But they are not part of any discernible plan, although their livelihoods are subject to oscillating rules and sentiments that impinge upon what they do. Yet as Kadek indicates, "we all have each other in mind; we all assume that each of us knows what the others are doing." It doesn't mean that food hawkers, as some kind of nebulous collective, are immune to disputes or acting at cross-purposes. Rather that the mutual anticipation of each other's conditions and maneuvers becomes a critical feature of each individual's own decisions.

Kadek may rise each morning to prepare for work at the same time and perform all the necessary routines without giving them much thought. After all, the capacity to act requires a certain disattention and indifference to precisely assessing each action and its sequencing. Yet he gears himself to be a part of an event that might interrupt that routine and place him in a different kind of relationship with his surrounds. As such, there is an impetus for risk, where he makes himself just a little more exposed or vociferous, impulsive and cunning, even if it means drawing unwanted attention to himself, and the consequences this might entail. In these mornings he is surrounded by neighbors who are also on their way to particular trades and transactions, even those who appear to do little. This collective cacophony of maneuvers each morning brings something a little bit "off," but usually neither alarming nor disheartening. As Kadek describes it, "Each day, despite my habits, I leave the compound with a different point of view."

Through kindness and generosity, willfulness and joking, manipulation and accident, everyone seems to be testing the waters just a little to see what other kinds of spaces open up for them. Kadek has talked several times about this testing as a way of "exposing the background." Here, exposure has to be coaxed and lured, that it is not just there for the taking, that it requires inventive work.

The key events of life: birth, death, marriage, schooling, illness, separation, friendship, and work constrain or maximize exposure to the larger world and come with their own sets of "demands" and consequences. Still these occasions are eventful not in terms of their predictability but their posing of new questions that have a range of possible responses. However locked-in the life trajectories of many seem to appear, where the character of one transition seems to specify that of all others, there is always a surfeit of indeterminacy. This is produced simply by how others attempt to fold in these events in as evidence for their own decisions.

Kadek speculates, "what my neighbors make of me each morning that I set off with my cart depends upon what they have made of all of the others that come into their view, and if I am even two minutes behind my usual schedule everything then has a different look, and even if I don't know it, I carry a different sense with me of who I am for everyone else." "Sometimes I try to guess what this is and try it on for size, try on a different look and a different way of looking, and so from now, even though the spot that I usually sell from is a good one, I change it up, ever so slightly." "My customers don't have to search for me, cause the changes are so slight; but I know they still wonder, why is he there and not here."

Again in Kadek's account, the background is a multifaceted dimension, entailing a willingness to see beyond what things appear to be in a present visage. It is an acknowledgement that what a person sees and how they are seen can shift all of the time depending on how the boundaries of what is paid attention to are drawn. It is also a belief in the affordances that are offered through suspending the conventionally coherent ways of reading the urban landscape. At one and the same time, Kadek believes that the highly localized and repetitive transactions that characterize his everyday neighborhood life can be continuously altered to produce quotidian histories for new possibilities. The apprehension of a larger "out there," a representation of the city that is not secured in a stable form but that encompasses a large volume of unframed details, provides a window onto a wide range of occurrences and operations. Kadek may not be able to empirically prove them but yet is confident they are indeed taking place. In these oscillations of the intensive and the extensive, the local and a more expansive terrain, he is able to know what to do and assume what for him are reasonable risks at the same time.

Holding lives together, temporarily

How are resident lives held together in face of increasing provisionality? Our everyday tendency is to see the events of the city as relationships between clearly defined entities and scales. We move from one "container" to another. Even if the street seems weakly contained, it is usually apprehended as a frame with its own rules and risks, its own demeanors and set rhythms. One situation is always a part of another, and as such, life seems nested within hierarchies of settings and structures. Everyday capacity is then largely a matter of alternating between the expectations, norms, and objectives associated with the institutional settings of which we are a part. Each context is composed of particular kinds of values and sign systems through which individuals might control the performances required of them (Kockelman, 2012).

Yet, what we tend to see as stable institutions continuously push and pull on each other. The familial intrudes on the bureaucratic and vice versa. That which is considered sacred may be rife with decadence; that which is officiously aloof may be prone to the most traumatic intimacies. Meaning overflows its available semiotic supports, and the performances usually associated with particular institutional contexts are deployed across situations as a means of making those situations work according to the norms associated with them or to conversely open them up to new functioning or immobilization (Brighenti, 2018; Gandolfo, 2009).

This is not merely a matter of individual humans or institutions having multiple roles or statuses, such as being a series of indices, kinds, functions, or identities. Rather, it is the speculative experiments with what something could be, of stretching and traversing the boundaries that appear to separate distinct situations and actors. In Kadek's *Menteng Dalam* there are certainly discernible household units that more or less occupy particular physical structures and that play out their lives in particular organizational patterns, even if the land below their feet possesses an uncertain future and where their sheer presence is vulnerable to eviction. But in my conversations with them, each resident does not live primarily within these folds, for they know as much, if not more, about those who they share no ready common belonging. They often pay more attention to the behaviors of relative strangers than they do intimates. On so many occasions, household members would scold those who spent too much time at my office.

Each tries to be different things with each other at different times depending upon how they read the prospective flow of things. Each aims for a kind of liquidity—a capacity

to know and be known in ways that exceed the “common sense”; the ability to convert one’s skills and positions into a negotiable form that potentially can purchase different opportunities and perspectives. As such, speculative transactions constitute the background affordances that enable the momentary stabilization of any situation as it negotiates a particular positioning or niche within the swirling intersections of urban life.

While processes of urbanization may seem to be governed through form, through the formatting of multiplicitous interactions among things, form is less the inscription of definition than a modality of holding (Moten, 2017). For the question is how to hold things in place long enough so that interaction might take place, for a relationship to occur. How to hold things so they do not veer in every direction and that they do not wander off. If there is no overarching compulsion for things to relate to each other, if there is no grand design through which things would automatically take their place, if there is no inevitable disposition to which things are inclined, then holding things together for the time being becomes critical (Kohn, 2013; Povinelli, 2011).

Kadek with his cart finds a home in the recesses of the city marked by overly curvy lines of a river that cannot be paved over and formatted with grids, a space too expensive to install roads wide enough for vehicular traffic. It is set along the slopes of an embankment that makes his home vulnerable to flooding as waters rise. This is not only because of rains but also of sinking aquifers and other subsidence due to excess high-rise construction that draws water from its own private wells. His daily journeys traverse the interstices among large infrastructures. Here, Kadek takes advantage, with many others, of vague terrains in proximity to clearly defined functions to eke out an “economy on the run,” even as he has parked his cart on the same street for years, his cart dwarfed by the presence of large billboards and heavy traffic. Kadek lives inside form, a form that enables him to sense a range of possible actions and constraints.

From Kadek’s account what is particularly important are those moments when things are about to take form, which are forming but have yet to coagulate into specific bounded constellations that can be definitively counted or that count for something in particular. It is that process of things feeling themselves out, of reaching toward and away from each other, circling, extending, not knowing for sure what to make of any particular encounter, not dwelling in one place for very long but passing on, being passed on (Nancy, 2008). Things indeed are taking shape, occupying form but in a way in which many different futures are possible. There is a sense of open-endedness that takes advantage of the potentials that past forms had posited but then were closed off, interrupted.

Kadek’s frequent dream is to wake up one morning, prepare the food to sell, and simply set off moving across the contours of the city where his whims or sensibilities directed him, while trying to remain imperceptible, not worrying about where his presence might be construed as legitimate or not, whether he was eligible to move in certain spaces or in certain way. For many of my associates, the challenge is how to be carried along by and through form capable of holding things in place even as this place stretches exponentially across enlarging surrounds.

It is clear that many residents of Jakarta are faced with everyday itineraries that have to cover more ground. The search for work, shelter, and resources entails extended commutes, and new infrastructures provide platforms for both heightened mobility and near-gridlock. Through their very itineraries, residents intersect disparate dimensions, places and sensibility, despite the forces of segregation that also characterize contemporary urban life. Cities are increasingly formatted, surveyed, and regulated through parametric and infrastructural design. They are increasingly ruled through pre-emptive governmentality and computation

that would seem to specify how distinct components and residencies are to be related to each other and how the outcomes will be measured.

Yet, there is also a surfeit of uncertainty as to what else might be taking (its) place. While the formatting of space to maximize its logistical potentials appears totalizing, the preponderance of slippages, leakages, and chokepoints would also suggest other trajectories of forms in the making. So the background is that incipience of form, but an incipience that is always there, of things leaning to and from, of veering toward and away regardless of their current formatting, of their participation in a forming underway, of a momentary holding (off) of sense.

Some have claimed that in the background of all contemporary social life is the reality of the “*hold*”—an infrastructure of suspension, of rendering exchangeable all that no longer holds an observable genealogy (Sharpe, 2016). What emerges from this, and close to what Fanon perhaps meant by invention, is something that does not hold anything but is an abyssal form in which everything is simultaneously misrecognized but enduring. It is something that has no ontological weight to launch rebellious forays from an outside, but simply the determination to hold without instrumentality and maximally exposed to all of the “elements” (Marriott, 2018). Ironically, in this hold, things are passed along, passed out.

As Jakarta’s residents increasingly live through their itineraries—their search for work, their altering the ways they transport themselves across the city, and the variations they make in terms of where they will spend the night when they are away from home—they hold their lives together not in fixed or stable routines as much as by paying attention to ways in which one thing leads to another. They learn how to operate under the radar of too much scrutiny and obligation, how to pass opportunities along to others and being exposed to possibilities being handed to them. The background, again, is this willingness to see something else in the midst of these itineraries that is not congealed, that is not held together by substantial commitments to place. Nevertheless, lives are held onto and together by continuously passing through the urban landscape in ways that do not ask for inclusion in specific sites or institutions but at the same time do not perceive any space as fundamentally excluding them.

As Mawar, a 55-year-old trader in Cityam puts it, “I have had this stall for many years, even back in the day before the train unleashed its flood of people.” “I have seen most everything; the land behind has been bought and sold so many times I doubt whether it knows who really owns it. All kinds of words get used to put people here and there, so many new rules and people carrying big money.” “But I am still here; I still sell, but no one seems to see me.”

Conclusion

In these reflections on the background, I have tried to suggest some small ways in which the human sensorium is being refigured to address conditions where residents who once intensely participated in urban core working class districts replete with heterogeneous walks of life and activities now find themselves living in increasingly provisional conditions at the urban periphery. Rather than seeing these new conditions as simply another form of marginality, such provisionality is being engaged as the pretext for elaborating engagements with the urban that seek protracted opportunities for experimenting with livelihood, territorial emplacement, and domestic organization. Particular ways of seeing, believing, and knowing accompany these experiments, which residents themselves frequently sum up as paying attention to the *background*.

Investments in itineraries of movement, of deferring commitments to tie down resources in building or improving homes and property, or of making long-term commitments to particular sources of livelihood all have important implications for governance and future urban development. Residents indeed may be at a loss for how to plan effectively and mitigate their exposure to untoward events. But this absence of definitive planning and a willingness to be exposed to facets of urban life beyond individual control or direct apprehension is also turned into a resource—a capacity that requires, again, particular ways of envisioning urban landscapes and their transformations, of being exposed to as many details of what is taking place as possible, while at the same time, holding one's life together, of not being overwhelmed. Passing through different experiences as urban heterogeneities pass through you becomes the means through which the background is continuously recomposed.

Experimentation has increasingly become individualized rather than a collective effort, reflecting the dismantling of working class districts that valued if not always realized demonstrable solidarity. As such, the challenge will be how to engage the willingness to see differently, the recognition of affordances derived from a more expansive point of view where forms are not yet fixed or interpretations established, and the capacity to compose a working image of the city that facilitates a more varied engagement with it—all of which constitute the *background* to which resident refer—into the logics of institutional development within the new territories of the extended urban. Additionally, for those that remain in highly contested, increasingly expensive and labor intensive urban cores, such as Kadek, the food hawker, how are their lives sustained in ways that don't flatten and standardize the improvisations so critical to their livelihoods.

While not wanting to retread the now tired faith in “unflagging popular imaginaries” (Olivier de Sardan, 2015: 151), the preoccupation with the background may also signal a surging desire for a sense of affective immediacy with the urban, an experience of making things together that the fascination with consumption has attenuated (Mazzarella, 2017). What may look like detachment from collective mediations of aspiration and effort may simply be a holding pattern in anticipation of political mobilizations that exceed the familiar social ascriptions—of people being prepared to be more than what they recognize.

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