City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development


Designed by Andrew Corbett, the cover of City Futures depicts an unidentified street market teeming with merchandise and people garbed in outfits identified with Muslims. With a diaphanous light afloat, the people appear hectic and the entire street scene is at once blurred and transparent. This is the contemporary profile of the city that Pieterse foretells—as cusped in “open-ended futures” laden with the unforeseen and the unknown, while stakes are brokered and settled incognito. In an open-ended future that is the city, urban activists and policy-makers are denied the certainty of the outcomes of their urban development agenda. Pieterse argues that policy makers and urban activists adjust their approaches to urban inequalities that are entrenched and magnified by the imperatives of globalisation. Effective policies are compromised when governments, particularly those in developing areas, highlight the benefits of globalisation without careful consideration of its marginalising tendencies, which are generally unexpected. Meanwhile, urban activists remain fixed in oppositional position, which for Pieterse has become “narrow and reactive.”

To release the city from the policy-fix formula or reactive approach so that an intersecting point of power and “technocratic discourses” could be established is the primary objective of this volume. Divided into eight chapters, the hub of City Futures is the UN-Habitat policy framework on shelter for all (chapter 3) and good governance (chapter 4). In reviewing these international policy frameworks, Pieterse’s intention is to inspire ‘urban actors’ committed to urban justice and reforms (p.37). This is particularly significant in the light of the current impasse in development studies, which Pieterse explicitly recognises (p.2). The evaluative premise is to examine urban policies and politics in a reciprocal, rather than in reactive or oppositional, manner. The analytical shortcomings of intellectuals and advocates of marginalised urbanites are briefly specified. This is to draw instantaneous attention to the advantages of legal and managerial tools provided by UN-Habitat agenda. In doing so, Pieterse is able to endow these tools with the politics of equality and justice advanced by urban activists. This is where the strength of Pieterse’s discussion rests—the simultaneous attention to management and mass mobilisation, to policies and politics. Though his expressed bias is in favour of the marginalised urbanites, he is able to show that organisational and administrative mechanisms are tangible ways of addressing claims to marginalisation, particularly of slum dwellers.

Pieterse’s prognostic mode of investigation makes it understandable why he sees the city as an ‘open-ended future.’ It precludes him, however, from delineating the spatial and temporal aspects of the city. Hence, there is no conceptualisation of the term open-ended future, which Adam (2006) views as the “temporal equivalent of forever.” The conceptual service of space is employed in Chapter 5 but only to the extent of providing the political with the ‘terrain of spatiality’ that characterises the density and proximity in urban areas. The possibility for a radical democracy in the city faces uncertainty, for official regulations are projected as ‘erasing’ or ‘suppressing’ urban density (p.87). Storper (1997), on the other hand, views the crowded and congested urban habitation as an expression of resourcefulness and creativeness that arose out of a seemingly rational urban plan.

Pairing the city with the future conveys the impression that it is a space and not a temporal element. By further designating the city as a ‘rebus,’ Pieterse’s city is removed from the contingency of past, present, or future. He yields to the contingency of speed when he decided to abbreviate his alternative version of urban politics due “space constraints.” One can reasonably ask why, in an already constrained and constricted urban space, Pieterse does not see that an alternative urban politics
necessarily entails space expansion. Instead, he falters into a prognostic mode when he says that his 
abbreviated discussion of alternative politics is merely ‘suggestive.’

Speed, not time, is Pieterse’s determining variable to bring about social change and development in 
urban areas. For instance, he wants “incremental change” linked with “radical incrementalism” as a 
response to the fast dynamics prevailing in cities, which could be restrained by the “prudence of 
incremental change (p.6).” He wants things to be accelerated and slowed down at the same time. A 
quick reference to Virilio’s concept of dromology (1986) or the politics of speed makes one appreciate 
that, historically, speed was spatially constitutive of cities. It became a political matter for authorities 
who had to wage a constant battle against the flow and movement of urbanites.

Pieterse appears oblivious to speed and how it has structured his writing. He admits that the book 
was “written in a relatively short space of time (p. vii).” As a result, his 20-year experience in urban 
development is barely noticeable in his discussions. This might have afforded him with some on-the-
ground lessons that could balance his prognostic analysis. The readers, on the other hand, might have 
been provided with some clues to as to why the spatial (city) has been transposed to the temporal 
(future).

Mindful of rapid and accelerated pace of change in cities in the last four decades of the 20th century, 
Soja (2000) is suspicious—even of his own judgement. Pieterse also covered the same span of 
periods. Soja, however, assumes a more cautious approach for it might be “too soon to conclude with 
any confidence” the future destination of cities (p. xii). In a sense, Pieterse is conveying his own sense 
of caution to policy makers and urban activists by posing the challenge of a combined focus on 
policies and politics. This is probably what distinguishes Pieterse’s book—that in the face of 
uncertainty, a gesture of confidence must be extended. Pieterse adequately responds to this 
imperative.

Readers, advocates, and practitioners of policies, urban studies, development studies, as well as 
those engage in the problematic of globalisation, which has generated debates on space-time-speed 
compression, will find this book a concise and practical companion. Those interested in understanding 
how international organisations such as the United Nations are weighing development with 
globalisation will also find this volume relevant.

References


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www.in-spire.org