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Overlooked cities: Shifting the gaze in research and practice in global urban studies

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ABSTRACT

There is growing scholarly attention to secondary and intermediary cities as their relevance for global urban development is increasingly recognised. We call urban academics, scholars, policymakers and practitioners to situate debates on these cities critically with the notion of “overlooked cities” to understand how knowledge from such cities is produced, circulated and negotiated in urban research and practice. This commentary aims to foreground the value, urgency and disruptive agency of individual and collective “overlooked cities” vis-à-vis the historical and contemporary debates to pave the way for alternative agendas for global urban studies.

1. Introduction

In recent years, urban debates and interventions have drawn attention to power relations in producing urban theories and dis-/en-abling practices. These contributions include theories on, and perspectives from, the global South (Miraftab & Kudva, 2015; Oldfield & Parnell, 2014), post-colonialism (Teverson & Upstone, 2011), decolonialism (Robin et al., 2020), rogue urbanism (Pieterse & Simone, 2013), sub-altern urbanism (Denis & Zerah, 2017; Roy, 2011), ordinary cities (Robinson, 2006), secondary cities (Marais et al., 2016; Pendras & Williams, 2021), small cities (Bell & Jayne, 2006), post-abysal thinking (Santos, 2018) and linguistic dynamics (Jazeel, 2019; Zhao, 2020), to mention a few. We concur that such framings matter in uncovering the political, economic and cultural logics of urban change within individual nations and across regions.

While we acknowledge these debates and their productive effects, there are cities that remain overlooked within the frameworks of these debates. “Overlooked cities” marks our collective critique of the indifferent views on cities that are marginalised, off-the-map, under-theorised and under-represented due to the logic of domination and control (Ruszczyk, Nugraha, & De Villiers, 2021). Conceptually, “overlooking is not defined by a silence or an absence, but ... a process filled with

presuppositions, prejudices, prioritisations and expectations.” (Ruszczyk, Nugraha, De Villiers, & Price, 2021, p.3) By shifting the gaze to heterogeneous temporalities, relationalities, power relations and forms of socio-spatial configuration, a politics of overlooking produces direct material consequences for these cities' present conditions and possible futures.

An analysis of “overlooked cities” invites us to shift the focus from a category of cities to a form of neglect. Such neglect can be with or without intentions, but it is always underlined by a kind of indifference – “I/We do not care” – and this status quo should be tackled, which requires us to see, think, feel, act and care about. For example, in turning to secondary cities, the lens of “overlooked cities” urges us to question the notion of primacy and interrogate the validity of evaluating these cities from a hierarchical and pre-emptive point of view (Jin & Zhao, 2021). Hence, “overlooked cities” is not intended as a synonym to other terms – secondary and intermediary, for instance – but speaks in relation to these terms, contributing to examining the socio-spatial productions and power relations regarding how these cities are conceived, perceived and lived in an urbanising world. In this sense, shifting the focus to spatial and political dynamics of overlooking is an epistemological intervention, and it also embodies an intellectual inquiry and political act that goes against merely labelling cities and potentially informing

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and reorienting urban planning and policy. In this commentary, we elaborate on the historical and contemporary debates on overlooked cities, discuss overlooked cities as collectivising agendas in international networks and map future research agendas and planning implications.

2. Historical and contemporary debates on overlooked cities

The foundational thinking on overlooked cities is in conversation with several theoretical frameworks, of which we highlight the work of architect Jorge Enrique Hardoy and development planner David Satterthwaite. They critiqued urban studies for mainly being conducted at a level of aggregation (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1986). While larger urban centres have more resources to overcome their problems, Satterthwaite argues that small and intermediate urban spaces will have “larger [challenges], the smaller the urban centre.” (Satterthwaite, 2017, p.16). At the same time, these cities are significant in their ability to provide urban-rural linkages as hubs for the service sector and links to expenditure and public services (Satterthwaite, 2021).

In the scholarly debates on secondary and intermediate cities in *Cities*, one of the key historical contributions is Lowder's (1991) paper, which evaluates how secondary cities in the global South present a considerable challenge to urban planners. She suggests that planners were ignoring the reality of smaller cities. In the context of Ecuadorian secondary cities, planners were catering for the elites based on visions from cities of the global North rather than utilising available resources for all residents. More recent *Cities* contributions include: Krishnamurthy et al. (2016), who profile Pune, India, a secondary tier II city lacking the institutional capacity to manage urbanisation; Oranje et al. (2020), who explore the overlookedness of non-metropolitan urban South Africa located in predominantly rural areas and the way formal and informal institutions provide a range of municipal services; Ma et al. (2021) provide an analysis of 23 Chinese cities including third, fourth and fifth-tier cities exploring how local governments move from promotion to marketing to city branding; and Scarwell and Leducq (2021) consider the tensions between global aspirational and local realities of the secondary city Danang, Vietnam. These contributions offer a valuable examination of emerging trends and processes in such cities and a richer understanding of overlookedness.

The commitment of *Cities* to City Profiles is significant for making particular cities visible in the academic landscape. However, Ahmed et al. (2020) reviewed the City Profiles between 1985 and 2013 and still found “a limited number of studies on small and secondary cities.” (*ibid*, p.1) They argue that there are very few empirical insights into those cities that will play a vital role in urban trajectories in the next decades, and hence call for more scholarship on overlooked and secondary cities. Their call resonates with a scholarly invitation to urgently turn the gaze towards overlooked cities, specifically examining how processes of overlooking in urban policies, practices and knowledge production are manifested, for example, in growth strategies, development agendas, fiscal transfer mechanisms, and restructuring and reform processes.

3. Emerging discourses of overlooked cities in international networks

In turning our attention to the roles and efforts of international networks to leverage the notion of overlooked cities, we identified three approaches, illustrated with examples of mobilising rapid responses and resources for post-pandemic recovery in smaller cities. The first example is Cities Alliance/C40, a network of the world's megacities addressing climate change. Roberts et al.'s (2021) report shows the repercussions of hierarchical discourses embedded into the concept of *secondary* cities. On the one hand, the report mobilises a “deficit narrative” that focuses on these cities' shortfalls while over-generalising post-pandemic challenges that seem similarly applicable to megacities, such as climate impacts and poverty. On the other hand, the *secondary* city concept calls out the need to address inter-city hierarchies, and specifically,

inequalities between secondary and megacities regarding the distribution of financial resources, productivity rates and infrastructure, amongst others. These inequalities may be further exacerbated during post-COVID-19 recovery because many national strategies show a bias towards investments in big cities.

Secondly, at United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the bi-annual Forum of Intermediary Cities and its regional activities provide an example of pursuing awareness raising, advocacy and monitoring of a decentralisation agenda based on the shared recognition of the central role of *intermediary* cities for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. UCLG has been promoting a “system of cities” approach to fight inequalities, acknowledging the need for strengthening connections and creating stronger cohesion in the recovery strategies and practices of smaller cities and territories.

Thirdly, we also recognise grassroots collectives and networks of practitioners that are captured in the ethos of overlooked cities but without framing them as such. These include the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, whose people- and community-centred approach provokes an engagement with practitioners from multiple sectors and smaller urban centres; and the Habitat International Coalition, which is working on human rights related to habitat, framed in territorial, urban and rural terms; amongst others.

In synthesis, these networks evoke distinct approaches to work in, with and through overlooked cities. The *secondary* city approach builds on a discourse of deficits and an ethos of catching up to address the inequalities inherent to inter-city hierarchies. The *intermediary* city approach suggests the need to strengthen linkages between cities and facilitate cross-learning. Practitioner networks remind us of the need for an engaging praxis that articulates alternative entry points (such as people-centred or territorial approaches) with the politics and ethos of overlooked cities.

4. Coda: a research agenda of counter-overlooking

While the call to recognise the importance and dynamics of secondary and intermediary cities has many precedents, we reaffirm the urgency and significance of paying attention towards the majority – yet overlooked – part of the urbanising world. UN-Habitat reports that “most of the future urban growth will occur in small, intermediate and secondary cities.” (2022, p.116) With the terms “overlooked cities” or simply “overlookedness,” we move a step further and capture new possibilities of making articulations of these under-studied and under-represented spaces in global urban studies. Overlookedness can serve as a reminder for us to see, feel, hear and look at such cities and urban spaces to extend the postcolonial critiques and *praxis*. This is what we can and should *do* with regard to the “disproportionate visibility” (Parnell & Robinson, 2012, p.596) that is still prevailing. Thus, we register the interconnections between the concrete and diverse urban experiences while at the same time interrogate abstract labelling logics that are still haunting and making such experiences invisible.

We call urban academics, scholars, policymakers and practitioners to take actions to look at “overlooked cities” genuinely as a provocation to surface blindspots and tensions, and their political characters, in various research and policy agendas of cities that have been trapped by a form of neglect. Uncovering overlookedness in these cities is critical to redressing the power relations and knowledge imbalances in global urban studies and reorienting research and planning practices in more relational and critical ways, with both local insights and global horizons. We propose three lines of inquiry for further counter-overlooking the urban majority:

- First, we should re-evaluate power relations in overlooked cities, that is, who holds power, where it originates and how it is being (re) produced. Often there is “overlookedness by design” taking place in urban planning ideas and practices, which could be vividly observed in cases such as asymmetric development and infrastructure

investment in larger urban centres in Sri Lanka and Indonesia (Nugraha, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022). The praxis of counter-overlooking can reveal the political contestations, control over resources, labelling logics and various hierarchies of power/knowledge that sustain the marginalisation, neglect and spatial divide of secondary and intermediary cities.

- Second, it is also crucial to analyse the production of urban knowledge in overlooked cities as a contested space. Counter-overlooking requires us to re-assess and re-frame the epistemic relations, representation and material consequences in the (re-)production of urban knowledge and rethink the current teaching and pedagogy. In so doing, we will manage to move from identifying “overlooking” *per se*, to the consistent efforts of looking at the overlooked and generating practice-driven knowledges. Not all secondary and intermediary cities are overlooked, and not all overlooked cities are secondary and intermediary. However, at the international level, reorienting from the pervasive “big city bias” and shifting the focus of research to non-mega and non-metropolitan cities can still be significant to inform the New Urban Agenda in advancing balanced territorial development across diverse urban sites (UN-Habitat, 2022).
- Third, it is important to galvanise the work of grassroots organisations and networks of cities, as they offer a distinct and critical praxis to address inequalities in and with overlooked cities, foster collective learning and solidarity and articulate overlooked cities as an alternative entry point. Such political commitments and praxes are crucial to generate new knowledges of our cities from local and everyday urban experiences, and to further interrogate various logics and hierarchies of urban power. We cannot emphasise enough how overlooked cities matter to our collective urban future, and this in turn requires our collective efforts to pursue the agendas of counter-overlooking in more urban research, planning and other practices.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Erwin Nugraha: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Julia Wesely:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Hanna A. Rusczyk:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Isolde de Villiers:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Yimin Zhao:** Investigation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

We declare no conflicts of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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