

Book Review: The Quito Papers and The New Urban Agenda by UN-Habitat, Richard Sennett with Ricky Burdett and Saskia Sassen, in dialogue with Joan Clos

Emerging out of UN Habitat III, The Quito Papers and the New Urban Agenda, authored by Richard Sennett, Ricky Burdett, Saskia Sassen and Joan Clos, provides a timely re-examination of the ideologies that have historically shaped global urban planning practices, offering a fresh perspective on embracing the urban in the twenty-first century. Combining rigorous academic research with policy recommendations, this is a welcome effort towards acknowledging and celebrating 'a more open, malleable and incremental urbanism', finds Amish Sarpotdar.

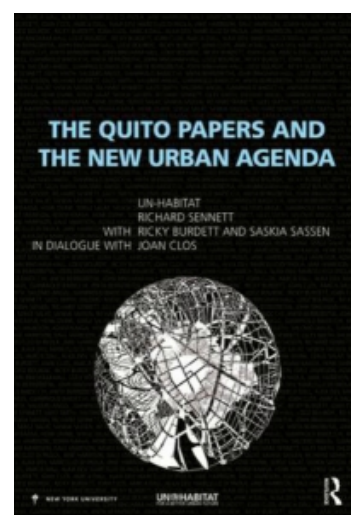
If you are interested in this book review, you may like to [watch a video here](#) of a related LSE event, 'The Quito Papers: Towards an Open City', recorded at LSE on 31 January 2017.

The Quito Papers and The New Urban Agenda. UN-Habitat, Richard Sennett with Ricky Burdett and Saskia Sassen, in dialogue with Joan Clos. Routledge. 2018.

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The Quito Papers and The New Urban Agenda provides a timely re-examination of the ideologies that have historically dominated the urban planning practices of the world. The book is a compilation of the papers and discussions that emerged from [Habitat III](#), the United Nation's (UN) recently concluded conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (2016). These are supplemented by contributions from a multidisciplinary set of experts and abundant polychromatic visualisations.

The Quito Papers is a welcome effort towards acknowledging and celebrating a 'more open, malleable, and incremental urbanism' that places 'space, equity, and design' at the centre of the remaking of the urban paradigm. With the focus on demographic and built environment conceptualisations of the urban saturated in light of the oft-repeated figure that half of the global population now lives in urban areas (6), the importance of the urban has been adequately recognised. True to the book's theme, it moves beyond the gourmet approach that the 1933 Charter of Athens adopted, with its Chef de cuisine, Le Corbusier, providing oversimplified technical answers to the complex problems of the urban. In addition, *The Quito Papers* offers a fresh perspective on embracing the urban by initiating a dialogue that traces the interaction of the physical and the social, and aims to envision the urbanisation process from Shenzhen to São Paulo. Nonetheless, the book neither claims to envisage a greater imagining of the urban nor does it seek to be a policy document to be treated as a tell-all solution manifesto.



The first section contextualises six significant forces shaping twenty-first-century urbanisation. These include population dynamics; loss of habitat resulting in accelerated streams of migration; urban land acquisitions; lack and excess of water; and, finally, a governance gridlock that challenges traditional notions of liberal democracy. Though this might not be an exhaustive list, it is a sufficient one for setting up the context of the book. The changing geographical diversity of population dynamics is discussed as a potential opportunity as well as a challenge for the provision of basic urban services. This is followed by a thorough elaboration of an alternative view of assessing migration flows and their relationship with international development policies, loss of habitat, plantation agriculture and land grabs.



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The important takeaway from this section is the issue of complexity, which is argued to be a more significant issue than nationalism versus globalism. Saskia Sassen argues for integrating complexity, incompleteness and diversity along with density in order to neutralise the risk of the surge in private acquisitions that threaten the ownership of the urban. Drawing on empirical examples from Mumbai, Los Angeles, London and Nairobi, this section stimulates intriguing thinking on issues of water mobility, water resource depletion and the hazards cities face from flooding due to climate change. Finally, the first section concludes with a clarion call for institutional co-operation across multiple scales of governance. This section provides the context for the forthcoming pivotal ideas that the book puts forth.

The second section, 'The Science of Urbanization', presents the concept of the Open City. This comes across as the central idea of the book. Here, the authors acknowledge that the city is a chaotic, non-perfect idea that needs to be fluid, openly embraced and is still a work in progress. Open system thinking energises the city to evolve, change and grow, providing fluid and porous boundaries that eventually democratise the city, not as a legal system but as a physical experience. The idea of the open system in urban thinking is further explained, drawing on a diverse interdisciplinary set of case studies transcending design, architecture and environmental planning. The idea of the open system is powerful in its 'simplicity'; but implementing it within our cities is a daunting task and this does not receive sufficient treatment in the book. In concluding this section, the idea of incorporating multi-scalar techniques that integrate planning and design strategies in order to create a resilient urban system is offered.

Enmeshed within these two parts is a third collection of four individual essays that are the crux of *The Quito Papers*. Sassen's thought-provoking essay discusses an often taken-for-granted theme concerning the ownership of the city. Richard Sennett extends the idea of the open system and summarises the advantages. Inspired by the work of [Jane Jacobs](#), he puts forth the idea of resistant and porous walls and borders which breed the incomplete form of a city; however, incompleteness doesn't necessarily mean enmity towards structure. Joan Clos discusses the policy thinking that needs to evolve in order to facilitate urbanisation. He makes a case for a better evidence base, the need to factor in functional as opposed to administrative boundaries and the urgency for state and international agencies to play a more proactive role in the matters of the city in tandem with respective local bodies. These four chapters, if read individually, offer an interesting and riveting bouquet of ideas; nonetheless, their value lies in reading them alongside the contextual ideas and multiple approaches concerning the urban that are also presented.

The book concludes with a fresh and stimulating conversation between Clos and Sennett. This informal exchange is a recommended read over a cup of afternoon tea – especially if you need a change from the monotony of Brexit discussions, and are genuinely interested in understanding the difficulties associated with implementing the idea of urbanisation discussed within the book. The conversation oscillates between national-local policies, agenda politics and power dynamics in the urban to the creation of public space and infrastructure development. Subtle shades of academia versus policy practice within the conversation makes it an honest and slightly humorous take on the pressing issues of today's cities and their possible solutions.

The collection lays bare the ideas and concepts that our cities and the urban sphere should embrace, debate, destroy, discuss and implement in a largely urban future. Even though the diverse issues presented might be overwhelming for the reader at times, the accessible writing style of the book, devoid of jargon, makes it an easy read. The scintillating visualisations colourfully aid the narrative, though some of the graphs and architectural designs might be hard to decipher for a non-technical audience. The themes of homelessness, deprivation, food scarcity, pollution, segregation and urban violence, though subtly mentioned, could also have been covered in more depth.

The Quito Papers nonetheless starts a conversation that engages and confronts the urban through multiple lenses, applying methods and concepts that cut across disciplines. Replete with geographically rich examples that resonate across scales, the book acknowledges the complexity and diversity of the urban and our failure to adequately make sense of it. The idea of conceptualising the urban as an open, dynamic and flexible concept that is space-time dependent is a first step towards remaking the urban. The book often negotiates and complements rigorous academic research with policy recommendations, a quality which I hold in high regard, and hence I advise reading this book for more than half of our global population that currently resides in cities and intends to shape the urbanisation processes.

Amish Sarpotdar is a PhD student in Planning and Environmental Management at the University of Manchester. His research focuses on regional economic development, spatial planning, spatial analysis, urban infrastructure, and policy. He has a background in economics and public policy.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.