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Report of the Consultation Workshop on **Urban Rights Social Movements in the Arab Region**

Dr. Mona Harb

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**Urban Rights
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the Arab
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Project Details

Project

*Beyond Arab Exceptionalism:
Transnational Social Movements
in the Arab Region*

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The Asfari Institute (AI) for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut convened on 4 July 2019 a consultation workshop on “Urban Rights Activism” at the American University of Beirut. This workshop is a component of the project on “Transnational Social Movements in the Arab Region” coordinated by AI. The workshop gathered about thirty academics and activists from Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Lebanon who discussed: i) the histories and legacies of urban activism, the actors engaged in urban rights activism, their organizational and institutional setups, ii) their frames and strategies of action, as their communication and networks, iii) the urban as an opportunity for providing “real utopias” for activism and political change.

In this report, I start by sharing the ideas and framings that guided the conceptualization and organization of the workshop, following which I provide a summary of the key themes that emerged from this day-long discussion.

I. Concept Note and Workshop's Organization

In the context of systemic urban inequalities and dismal environmental conditions, where hegemonic and/or authoritarian political elites and their business allies systematically neglect urban services and usurp public spaces, rights-to-the-city movements in many Arab cities have been increasingly organizing to impact political change. In Tunis, Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad, Amman, and Kuwait, activists claiming more inclusive, just, and sustainable cities are increasingly visible in the streets, and in their collective action. With issues ranging from effectively decentralized and representative local governments, to equitable and affordable housing policies, to enabled access to basic urban services, to freely accessible public open spaces, urban activism has been articulating increasingly clear and vocal sets of demands. The rise of urban social movements is closely associated to the density and diversity of urban settings that provide activists with “relational opportunities” that enable access to resources, as well as with “emotion-generating interactions” that fuel and shape struggles, and may sustain mobilisation (Nicholls and Uistermark 2017: 11, 16). The workshop stems from the need to unpack and understand such increased urban-political visibility and capacity at effectively organizing and mobilizing. We posit that two explanatory factors at least may explain these noteworthy urban mobilizations: new types of institutional setups and novel operational strategies and tactics that enable the envisioning of “real utopias” (Wright 2010).

Accordingly, the workshop sought to critically investigate urban activism in the Arab region, in order to document their work and further enable their action, through learning from their experiences, but also by providing urban movements' leaders and members with opportunities to intersect, exchange, and forge productive links. The workshop seeks to interrogate three sets of issues vis-à-vis right-to-the-city movements/urban activists' collectives, in order to assess their actual and potential impacts on political change:

Actors and organizational setups

Who are the urban activists? How do critical urban scholars, urban planning students, urban practitioners, and other activists come together? What is *urban* activism, and what qualifies it as such? How do urban activists and others organize legally and formally? What is the rationale guiding their choice? To what extent are they inspired by other similar movements elsewhere? How do they effectively operate, and how inclusive and/or effective are their decision-making process and mode of operation? How do they assess their “performance” and how do they hold their members/leaders accountable? What are the administrative, legal, and financial challenges they face, and how do they address them?

Strategies, tactics and tools of action

How do urban activists work, organize, and mobilize? What strategies of action and tactics do they experiment with? How do they negotiate the government's regular attempts at “disempowering, narrowing and constraining” their work (Miller and Nicholls 2013: 463)? How do they legitimate their action, and manage to increase their constituency base? What is the role of research (archival, legal, scholarly) in the formulation of their strategies and tactics? What is the role of media, communication tools, and social media in their mobilization and recruitment?

Political position/manifesto & “real utopias”

Urban activists are political actors seeking political change—or are they? While they may relatively easily agree on specific, tangible urban issues, do they seek to converge on a broader political manifesto, and how? Do they seek to connect to meso- et macro-politics, and how? How does their positionality and/or withdrawal impact urban activism dynamics? How does it help or hinder the identification of a “common motivating frame” that drives the consolidation of local and national ties, across sectors, scales and places (Miller and Nicholls 2013: 461-2; Uistermark et al. 2012: 2551)? How does their ability to visualize and envision

a hopeful imagined future—a “real utopia” (Wright 2010)—a force that further enables collective action? How do their appropriations of, and claims on urban space and place contribute to their organizing?

The workshop stemmed from the urge to investigate urban activism in the Arab region building on the following set of research interests:

Urban Rights as a Normative Claim

An increasing number of social movements and mobilizations in the Arab world are adopting causes focused on urban issues, ranging from affordable/decent housing, to rights to public space, to protecting the coast, to rights to livability, and rights to partake in decisions regarding the city's spaces. These movements generally share a common thread embedded in critical urban studies, particularly the works of Henri Lefebvre who enabled the reading of the city as a social space, and an understanding of the urban through its spatial production process (1974, 1991). Indeed, Lefebvre conceptualized social space through a spatial triad, incorporating three intersecting dimensions: conceived space, practiced space and lived space. Conceived space is the one produced by urbanists, professionals and political decision-makers who imagine and draw the space of the city. It's the space imagined, represented, and planned in maps, drawings, discourses, visions and perspectives. Practiced space is generated by the dwellers that use space and navigate it variably, elaborating spatial practices related to their home, work and leisure. It's the space of mobility, the trajectories we use on a daily level, and its associated perceived environment. Lived space is generated by people's experiences of space, and their appropriations of it in ways that subvert its original conceptions. It's the space where people are able to live their desires and where the political is nested—and the space that is rapidly controlled (again) by authorities that seek to transform it into a conceived, planned space. For Lefebvre, lived space holds the potential of an urban revolution and political change. The right to the city is the right to claim lived space, and to prevent it from being dominated by conceived space.

Urban activists in Arab cities and towns have been operating within this Lefebvrian framework of urban rights, without necessarily referring to it openly, but they have been echoing it in their claims, actions and narratives. This framework has also been increasingly

democratized (and diluted) with the UN-Habitat new urban agenda, which seeks to empower city-based governance and urban-based citizenship namely through building the capacities of local governments and civil society groups to work together towards more efficient service provision, and better participatory local democracy placing people at the center of local development and urban planning strategies. As such, urban activists have been incorporating and disseminating these ideas, as they adopt them through conversations and exchanges they participate into in their cities, and at regional and international meetings they participate into. Indeed, the discourse on urban rights, or rights to the city, has become an established norm—even if its grounding into Lefebvre's Marxist “urban revolution” framing has been lost along the way and largely depoliticized.

The “Urban” in Urban Social Movements

How do “urban” social movements differ from social movements? What does the “urban” bring to social mobilizations? Urban social movements have often been researched similarly to social movements, using the analytical frames of actors, strategies, frames, repertoires, and issues... In this vein, the “urban” was merely an adjective used to describe social movements rather than conceptualizing them in relation to understandings of social space and processes of spatial production. In their recent book, Ustermark and Nicholls provide us with a novel framing of urban social movements, where they take the urban seriously, and incorporate it in the theorization of urban social movements, building on their empirical work investigating immigrants' mobilizations in Los Angeles and Amsterdam (2016). They argue that there are two specificities to urban social movements. One is density and diversity. Density (or concentration) and diversity are provided by cities in ways that enables social movements to access relational opportunities and to network—key dimensions of social mobilization. Density and diversity also generate possibilities for emotional interactions that yield affect and passion, which supply symbolic meanings to contention and allow it to endure over time, against material constraints. The second specificity of urban social movements is how their actors strategically select and utilize urban spaces in political action, ranging from squares to streets to peripheries and/or specific sites—and how these strategic choices of spaces vary according to actors, issues, frames, stakes and times.

The Specificities of Urban Rights Activism in the Arab Region

Three specificities characterize urban rights activists in the Arab region—which intersect with specificities that are distinguishing new rights movements in general, in the Arab region and in other world cities where contention is being deployed.

First, these movements are organized in new types of institutional setups—more horizontal and less hierarchical than earlier movements, whereby leadership is multiple and decentralized into units, with decision-making processes that are more inclusive and participatory. Such movements reject their formation into non-governmental organizations, and prefer operating with the legal setup of non-profit companies or cooperatives, which they then try to adapt to ways of working that they try to make more flexible and creative. This experimental approach carries many challenges that are beyond the scope of this report but demonstrates the desire to create more productive institutional setups that enable more representative and inclusive forms of leadership and decision-making. Urban rights activists name their movements as platforms, collectives, or campaigns

Second, urban rights activists are operating according to new strategies of mobilization and collective action, which mobilize a variety of tools which encompass protests and marches, but also rely heavily on social and legal research, often in conjunction with engaged lawyers and legal collectives. This research serves as a solid grounding of their mobilization work as they develop an intimate knowledge of the urban issue, which legitimizes them within the community and among decision-makers. Their critique is thus well informed with policy knowledge and substantive evidence, which is then represented through visual and mapping tools that further its impact and enable its dissemination. Social media is a key tool in propagating the information rapidly and across groups and stakeholders, and serves also to mobilize and organize.

Third, and this is a unique specificity to urban rights movements, is the ability to present what Wright has termed “real utopias” (2010) to the public and mobilize people around these imagined better potential realities—this ability to visualize what urban realities could be produced if people were put at the center of urban policy-making has the power to instigate further emotions and affect amongst constituents, and thus

rally them to further collective action. Indeed, urban activists are increasingly relying on elaborating design ideas competitions as tools through which design activists are able to present real alternative solutions to existing detrimental policies to the natural and built environment. Such solutions demonstrate that other realities are possible, and improving livelihoods in city and people’s livability is not a matter of technical or financial hurdles, but is predominantly a political decision of favoring the few at the expense of the many.

The workshop was organized in four sessions to discuss the above themes. The first two sessions interrogated **the legacies, trajectories, frames and visions of urban activism**, as well as **at their institutions, governance and sustainability**. Contributors were asked to reflect on the below set of questions:

- What are the legacies and origins of rights-to-the-city movements? What is the role, if any, of academic programs in critical urban studies/planning/design in setting up a new generation of urban activists? What particularities, if any, characterize the trajectories and sociological profiles of today’s urban activists? What frames of action/visions/theories of change guide urban activists’ work: are these academic, pragmatic, and/or utopian?
-
- What are the organizational and institutional setups of urban activists’ movements and collectives? What governance structures did they opt for, and what legal features govern their work? What are their membership systems? Did they draft by-laws and how? How do they hold their members accountable for their acts? What are their sources of financing, and what administrative and financial challenges do they face to sustain their action?

The third session **explored strategies, communication and networks** through these interrogations:

- What strategies and tactics of work are used for organizing and mobilization, and which ones are most/least successful? What is the role of social media and communication platforms, and how do they enable/transform organizational/mobilization work? Do urban activists interact with/learn from other local, national, and transnational groups; if yes, which, how and why; if not: why not? What are the challenges of outreach-ing, building networks and forging connections across places?

The fourth and final session was organized as a roundtable discussion during which participants debated “the urban as a real utopia,” investigating the following queries:

- What challenges and opportunities can one identify for urban activists in cities of the Arab region? Are intra-group tensions threatening the consolidation of urban activists’ movements? Or are state policies repressive and co-opting enough to constrain their action? Is change from within or from without? Can the “urban” of urban activism be further built upon to enable mobilizations, given its ability to provide collective action with “real utopias”?

The workshop closed with the screening of *Landless Moroccans*, a film directed and produced by scholar-activist Soraya El-Kahlaoui. The film tells the story of the destruction of the homes of Douar Ouled Dlim in February 2014, low-income housing units located in a high-end neighborhood in Rabat. The dwellers refused to leave their land, building makeshift camps, lobbying the government for ten months, and trying to reclaim their right to housing. It is a film that questions rights to the city and urban citizenship. The film can be accessed on this link: <http://www.landlessmoroccans.com/fr/home/>

Parts of the workshop on urban rights were summarized in this newspaper article:

<http://marocenv.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/environmental-activism-press.jpg>

In the next section, I will report on the main themes that emerged from our discussions.

II. Key Themes on Urban Rights Activism in the Arab Region

History matters to understanding urban rights activism.

Contemporary struggles and protests are inscribed in a *longue durée*, which is essential to narrate as to better understand ruptures, transformations and/or continuity. As Serge Yazigi (Beirut Madinati, Lebanon) discussed, examining the history of urban activism in Lebanon reveals strong intersectionalities with ongoing geopolitical conflicts, with the hybrid political order, as well as with other activisms—especially the women’s movement, and with the establishment of university programs in urban planning. Wars in Lebanon have generated a professional expertise in post-war reconstruction, and rich information on the cities’ urban fabric. Conversely, this extensive expertise was not put to good use by public agencies that operate according to sectarian politics and the interests of partisan leaders. As such, professional urban experts invested their resources in higher education institutions, which ultimately led to the establishment of urban planning graduate programs whereby generations of urban practitioners and scholars were being trained. Within these universities, a legacy of activism had been bred by years of collective organizing led by cultural clubs and secular groups, namely during the Nahda period of the early 20th C. Because of the locked opportunities within public agencies to advance urban planning matters and elaborate sound urban policies, many scholars and practitioners increasingly shifted to activism to lobby and advocate for better urban livelihoods and livability in cities, and joined activists’ platforms.

Urban activism focuses significantly on the production of knowledge, in multiple forms.

Urban activists in Arab cities and towns are keen on producing grounded, informed knowledge through which they are able to profile urban issues rigorously, and make a scientific case for alternative solutions.

This knowledge is also disseminated through social media and prints to mobilize larger constituencies, and raise awareness about the urban issues and stakes at hand. Yahya Shawqat (10Tooba, Egypt) and Abir Saksouk (Public Works, Lebanon) both underscored the production of knowledge as a key strategy of their work and action. 10Tooba contributes to the production of urban knowledge through its urban observatory and its urban indicators about Egypt’s built environment. These measures establish a baseline through which activists can ground their claims about gaps between the urban problems and the state’s urban policies, which are highly centralized and disconnected from people’s spatial practices and needs. Documentation is also a key methodology of work as it enables a better understanding of informality dynamics, and more informed interventions focused on cultural and spatial practices in public open spaces (e.g. streets, dead-ends, left-over spaces) that seek to improve livability in the neighborhoods (Omar Nagati, Cluster, Egypt). The production of knowledge through maps and visuals is often very important to urban activism, as data that is easily disseminated through social media, prints. Public Works (Lebanon) has been also experimenting with design ideas competition to engage more people in urban organizing and action, and to build partnerships. Ideas competition have also the merit to provide concrete alternatives through which people can re-imagine their environments.

Moreover, urban activists are well aware of the need to decolonize urban knowledge and producing vocabulary and concepts grounded in people’s spatial practices and understandings. Thus, in Beirut and Cairo, activists are elaborating urban lexicons and producing urban knowledge in Arabic, in clear efforts to “regain control over concepts and tools of urban planning to better impact urban realities” (Abir Saksouk, Omar Nagati).

Urban activists are professional actors, with practical expertise and scholarly training.

Serge Yazigi (Beirut Madinati, Lebanon), Sami Yassine Turki (Association of Tunisian Urban Planners, Tunisia), and Omar Nagati (Cluster, Egypt) highlighted this distinguishing feature of urban activism in Arab cities. Yassine shared how the Association of Tunisian Urban Planners is trying to play an active role in lobbying for a more adequate set of building regulations, and has successfully contributed to an exercise of participatory budgeting at the scale of a local government. However, these attempts are cut short by lots of challenges, namely related to the increasing informalization of decision-making in Tunisia, especially after the revolution and the de-legitimization of local governments. The urban activism of professionals is also contingent on volunteering, which is often an unsustainable journey, which threatens the durability of urban action, like what happened with Beirut Madinati (Nahida El-Khalil).

Urban activism is distinguished by women's strong participation, especially in Lebanon and Tunisia.

In Tunisia, a quota for women's participation was introduced at the level of municipal leadership: if the mayor is male, the vice-mayor should be female. Today 20% of Tunisian mayors and 80% of vice-mayors are women. In Lebanon, women played a prominent role in shaping the historical legacy of activism, challenging the authority of a patriarchal society since the 1930s, and establishing themselves as legitimate leaders of social and political change. These successes still echo in today's urban activism in Lebanon, namely through the role of women urban activists who played a central role in mobilizing to influence post-war reconstruction in 2006 and who organized, with other activists, in the Beirut Madinati municipal campaign of 2016, and in the Order of Engineers and Architects' Naqabati elections of 2017. We should not however mystify this women's participation as it is also constrained by concerning power struggles, within activists' circles themselves—a theme that Bernadette Daou explores in her forthcoming paper for this research project.

Urban activism is often repressed, but still occurs, away from primary cities, using new spatial forms and tactics.

In authoritarian and repressive regimes, there are few margins of maneuvering for organizing, and mobilizations are small and short in duration. In Morocco, Soraya El-Kahlaoui (EHSS, Paris) qualifies such organizing as “non-movements,” building on Asef Bayat's work. These are small movements focused on specific issues related to informality, housing, and access to services. In Morocco, middle classes are allied with the monarchy, and benefit from services, especially housing. Urban experts and researchers do not critique urban policies, as they work closely with the state as consultants. There are some critical urban researchers but they do not take a political position and restrict their work to research rather than engaged research/activism. Urban issues discussed are often related to heritage matters—which are more politically correct than housing, services, public space, or urban rights. The movement of 20 February in Morocco was noteworthy because activists intersected with working class people in the old city (not in the city center). While it lasted, activists organized marches, and debated where to do them—it was an experiment at community organizing. They linked their rights to housing to citizenship and belonging: “if you don't have a home, you don't have a nation.” The movement was violently repressed, and dwellers were penalized through not providing their children with access to schools and rejecting their administrative papers, in addition to criminalizing them as “dirtying the city,” and being a threat for radicalization.

Abdallah Essatte (Mohammad V University, Morocco) and Wafae Belarbi (ENA, Morocco) further explain how protests have been moving away from large Moroccan cities towards smaller and secondary towns. They are also taking the form of long marches, and using social media to contest public decisions. In a small town, protests were about making noise to annoy authorities (*tantana*). In neighborhoods and peripheries, movements are rather fragmented and focused on issues of poor infrastructure and service provision.

Omnia El-Khalil (10Tooba, Egypt) also underscores how Egypt's urban policy is predominantly concerned with neoliberal urban visions of growth and development, at the expense of the poor. Urban programs are

about building new cities and projects for Cairo 2030 and Cairo 2050, and are evicting and relocating poor dwellers from slums to materialize their plans. The tools for contestation, negotiation or bargaining are absent. Oppositional politics is made impossible by police repression. As such, urban activism can only operate quietly and, as Omar Nagati (Cluster, Egypt) explains, focus on documentation and small-scale grounded urban practice.

Is Urban Activism Linked to the Political? Should it Be?

Given many urban activists are experts, academics and professionals, is it more strategic to keep urban and political action separate? Is it at all possible? Can urban advocates organize to advance “technical” issues without venturing into politics? While some perceived such a choice as reproductive of the political system, a denial of systemic issues, and a shift away from required radicalism (Omnia El-Khalil, 10Tooba), others argued that such pragmatic focus could be strategic and serve to expand and connect “cracks in the system” to induce political change. Building on the works of Pieterse and Simone (2018) who encourage this dual strategy of working from within and from without the system, all forms of activism and organizing are essential to advance political change. In addition, the urban has this interesting capacity of bringing people together on everyday pragmatic real concrete issues—in many cities of the Arab region, labor unions and working class organizations have been suppressed and/or co-opted, and as such the urban may present a potentially shared horizon (Nizar Hassan, Li Haqqi). Still, it was noted that the urban activist/expert may be detached from the groups who are directly impacted by urban issues: who speaks on behalf of whom and how does this reshuffle power, voice and mobilization? (Omnia El-Khalil, 10Tooba) Attempts to foster stronger linkages are taking place—as narrated by Abir Saksouk for Public Works (Lebanon) which privileges participatory and advocacy approaches to their urban work, materialized through regular community meetings, where relationships are built and trust is fostered. However, activists face lots of challenges on the ground: urban projects are often conceived in ways that advance the private interests of political leaders and their related business networks, at the expense of people’s livelihoods and natural environments. However, as people are dependent on and accountable

to political leaders, and have no viable alternatives to turn to, they cannot and do not mobilize against urban projects. Those who do are a minority, and are often shun by their community, resulting sometimes in further divisions and tensions.

In sum, even in contexts of repressive and authoritarian regimes, urban activists continue to operate. Organizing, contesting, protesting is thus not a choice: it is always happening, against the odds, and in various ways. Finding ways to connect groups who are organizing is important, but challenging (Rana Hassan, Omnia El-Khalil). Repression and threats do produce heightened levels of insecurity nonetheless, which can dissuade activists from pursuing their work. Some choose emigrate. Those who stay and continue their organizing resort to a variety of strategies to do so, ranging from the production of knowledge, to small urban interventions, to transient urban actions/campaigns focused on specific issues. In Tunisia and Lebanon, because margins of maneuvering are larger, more experiments are taking place in urban activism and, occasionally, coalescing into some wins. Yet, urban policies that favor capital, increase inequalities and injustice, keep recurring and the abilities of urban activists to sustain their action, with limited resources is often put to a very hard test.

To wrap up, let us return to our original set of questions concerning: i) urban rights’ actors and their organizational setups; ii) strategies, tactics and tools of action of urban activists; and iii) the political positioning and abilities of actors to generate real utopias. The workshop provided ample evidence to answer the first two questions, and less information on the third strand of questions. Indeed, these questions probably require a different setup than a workshop to be answered: I would suggest elaborating a specific protocol to discuss how urban activists understand the political, and select to relate to it, and its administration through in-depth interviewing with key resource persons within activist groups and organizations. Indeed the discussion about activism and connections to meso- and macro-politics, the analysis of positionality and “motivating frames” that enable the consolidation of local and national ties, across sectors, scales and places (Miller and Nicholls 2013: 461-2; Uistermark et al. 2012: 2551), and questions regarding abilities to visualize imagine futures are topics that requests a different setting than a public workshop where speakers are provided little time with.

Concerning urban rights' actors and organizational setups, the workshop provided rich data on the profiles of actors who appeared to incorporate many urban professionals and scholars—those “experts” who are actively aware of their responsibility to engage in political change and experiment with ways for doing so, from within the university, and/or from within their practice. In Lebanon, the university—particularly the American University of Beirut—significantly enabled engaged scholarship in the urban field, specifically since the Israeli war of 2006. The proliferation of urban planning and design programs across universities trained many urban scholars and urban professionals to critical urban studies, encouraging many to network, organize and mobilize to advance urban rights in cities, with a clear focus on Beirut. The municipal campaign experience of Beirut Madinati in 2016 is the epitome of this mobilization. In addition, a number of urban activists have been establishing organizations that undertake urban and legal research, and design campaigns and ideas competitions to advance their work (e.g. Public Works, Nahnoo, Lil Madina). In Egypt, universities are absent from the urban activism landscape but many urban scholars and professionals have been actively working through independent organizations, also deeply engaged in urban and legal research, and in the production of embedded knowledge (e.g. 10Tooba, Cluster). In Tunis, urban planning experts have organized in a professional organization, lobbying and advocating for better urban and building regulations, as well as for more effective decentralization. They also undertook some interesting experiments working with participatory budgeting at the municipal level. In Morocco, urban activists do not seem as engaged in mobilizing as their peers in Lebanon, Egypt and Tunisia, and operate as critical scholars from within the confines of the university. Among all four cases, Lebanon seems the most prone to experimentation and to possibilities of effective urban activism.

All countries are, however, constrained by repressive police apparatus and authoritarian state practices that constrain enormously possibilities for organizing and effecting change. As such, when it comes to investigating urban rights' actors' strategies and tools of action, it is clear that actors are struggling with organizing and mobilizing. Besides the internal financial, legal and administrative hurdles that prevent the establishment of institutional frames of action that enable effective and accountable work, governments

and authorities make it very challenging for them to navigate “disempowering, narrowing and constraining” policies and interventions (Miller and Nicholls 2013: 463). Within these odds, urban activists' possibilities for action are restrained to knowledge production and changing the terms of the public debate on the city. Indeed, the production of information and data about the built and natural environment, in a context of intentional data obscurity and scarcity, becomes a revolutionary act documenting the impacts of urban policies on people's livelihoods. Publishing and discussing this information through print and social media platforms, holding press conferences and public seminars, organizing ideas competitions, are additional acts claiming rights to the city. Indeed, through critical debate and grounded claims for urban change, urban activists and their peers speak truth to power and contest ruling hegemonies that are producing social and spatial inequalities, preventing inclusion and social justice, and destroying ecologies. Producing knowledge and informing critical debate may seem like little contributions on the difficult path of political change, but, for urban activists, it is better than compliance and acquiescence.



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