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“Danger Zones,” “Death Zones,” and Paradoxes of Infrastructural Space-Making in Manila

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ABSTRACT
Infrastructure and the spatial practices that coalesce around them come to matter in multiple ways. Building on the legacy of splintering urbanism and subsequent appraisals, we explore the paradoxes of infrastructural spaces in a Global South city. In Manila, urban infrastructure plays a central role in enabling evictions in city spaces marked as “danger zones,” and in inhabiting “death zones” in the peripheries where evictees are resettled. This piece employs a relational view of the tensions between the dispossessive and sustaining work of infrastructure to extend the spatial metaphors of urban infrastructure and to illuminate political possibilities built around connections.

KEYWORDS
Infrastructure; evictions; flood control; peripheries; Manila

Introduction
Building on the legacy of splintering urbanism and subsequent work on urban infrastructure, we reflect on the infrastructural trajectories in Manila and the spatial relations produced by their implementation. The spatial work infrastructure performs as it folds into the urban fabric suggests multiple modes of co-production of urban space at play. In this piece, we explore the paradoxes of infrastructural spaces and their implications through the experience of a particular Global South city.

We focus on two modes of infrastructural space-making: infrastructure as dispossessive through “danger zone” evictions in the city, and as sustaining in “death zones” in the periphery. The first mode involves evictions of urban poor driven by the construction of big-ticket infrastructure projects that fulfil aspirations of world-class and resilient city-making, and that demarcate slum settlements as “danger zones”—marginal spaces designated by the state as uninhabitable and in danger of flooding, and consequently slated for clearance (Alvarez and Cardenas, 2019). The second, framed in terms of lack and absence, encompasses the conjoined struggles of the urban poor of inhabiting spaces and accessing vital services in “death zones”—remote urban peripheries where relocated evictees are consigned to a life of greater abjection (Dalisay and De Guzman, 2016; Ortega, 2020). These two modes of infrastructure produce dispossessive and sustaining logics, politics, and imaginaries that the urban poor encounter with paradoxical resonance. Urban infrastructure thus ties together the production of center and the periphery,
while shifting populations around to free space in the city for development projects (Doshi, 2013), and at the same time creating new modes of urbanization in the margins (Caldeira, 2017; Simone, 2018). We highlight these infrastructural paradoxes (Howe et al., 2016) across space to demonstrate how infrastructure’s double quality engages with and extends prominent spatial metaphors such as networks, bypass, and splintering.

Splintering urbanism brought critical attention to the infrastructural production of urban space, demonstrating how interconnecting landscapes of infrastructure reconfigure the urban fabric (Graham and Marvin, 2001). In mediating flux across space, infrastructures have taken on a networked form, underpinned by a modern infrastructural ideal of integrating urban space that has subsequently collapsed as infrastructural services are unbundled and segmented, resulting in the splintering of urban space. Processes of unbundling and transitions are context-dependent, but they are characterized by the integration of valued sites and the bypassing of others.

Work on Southern cities meanwhile presented challenges to the universality of the neoliberal splintering of the modern infrastructural ideal, unsettling and worlding narratives of transitions by identifying other processes that lead to infrastructural fragmentation (Furlong, 2014; Kooy and Bakker, 2008). Rather than a singular or integrated network, multiple infrastructure networks serve different urban groups as malleable, dynamic, and contingent infrastructural practices are assembled incrementally from below (Lawhon et al., 2018; Simone and Pieterse, 2017). Diversifying urban infrastructural accounts thus allows for comparative thinking and for seeing the various spatialities they take in particular cities (Coutard and Rutherford, 2015; Lawhon et al., 2018; McFarlane et al., 2017). To these two bodies of urban work—splintering urbanism and heterogeneous infrastructure—we add paradoxes of infrastructural spaces as a means of building analytical and political connections between different modes of infrastructure.

We revisit infrastructure’s place in Manila as a particular example to illustrate how tensions between multiple modes of infrastructure multiply relations across space. We see the city being reshaped by the presence of particular kinds of infrastructure—world-class, aspirational, and climate-change resilient—that not only bypass or restrict access to urban services, but enable, justify, and require expulsions of the urban poor from the city. This infrastructural space-making, however, embeds relocated evictees in an experience of a parallel absence in the far-flung fringes: uninhabitable homes, restricted mobility, and limited access to vital services that force improvisation and assembly of new infrastructural arrangements. In what follows, we first provide a brief history of Manila’s infrastructural trajectories before discussing the conjoined process of “danger zone” evictions and infrastructural struggles in peripheral “death zones,” and we then conclude with some notes on possibilities for urban politics.

### Situating Manila’s Infrastructural Turns

Manila’s infrastructural trajectories align with changing visions of the city. Urban administration at the turn of the twentieth century sought to bring modernity to a colonial capital, expanding networked infrastructure from the fortified urban core to the metropolitan region. American colonial emphasis on disciplining sanitary flows and visions of aesthetic order reshaped the city’s vital infrastructural networks, notably its waterwork,
drainage, sewerage, and public transportation systems (Saguin, 2017). Corresponding to Graham and Marvin’s formulation of the modern infrastructural ideal, public ownership of urban infrastructure and service delivery were carried over by a post-independence state faced with the magnified challenges of managing the city’s spatial expansion that outstripped initial colonial plans. The turn to authoritarian rule beginning in the 1970s further centralized state power in provisioning and regulating infrastructure and coincided with attempts to institute an integrated metropolitan governance. This urban regime prioritized the construction of modern, world-class mega infrastructures to manage a city plagued by crises while legitimizing authoritarian rule (Connell, 1999; Pante, 2016).

Emerging parallel to the state’s post-war infrastructural roll-out were archipelagos of well-provisioned privatized urban enclaves that effectively bypassed the rest of the city (Shatkin, 2008; Mouton and Shatkin, 2020). Neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s strengthened privatization and segmentation of urban infrastructural services, resulting in the corporate reconfiguration of urban space (Mouton and Shatkin, 2020; Ortega, 2016). Despite attempts to plan and govern Manila through a coherent unitary city ideal during colonial and authoritarian urban regimes, the resulting infrastructural landscape may be best described as patchwork (Garrido, 2019). Incomplete, unfinished, and failed infrastructures, in crisis and unable to catch up with growth, coexist spatially with infrastructure networks that seek to upgrade, extend, or experiment with novel forms of urban configurations.

Infrastructure has provided the locus for aspirational urban development, particularly with big-ticket projects constructed through public–private partnerships that first took shape in the 1990s, expanded in the 2000s, and intensified in the Build-Build-Build program in the late 2010s. The construction of these networks of expressways, railways, reclamation, and flood control projects that undergird urban enclaves often requires the simultaneous eviction of the urban poor and their resettlement to the peripheries (Choi, 2014; Jensen et al., 2020; Ortega, 2016).

Flood Control Infrastructure and “Danger Zone” Evictions

A distinct type of urban imaginary tied to disaster risk and resilience management has further reconfigured the place of infrastructure in Manila. The Ondoy (Ketsana) floods that submerged most of the metropolitan region in 2009, coupled with the integration of climate change mitigation and adaptation principles in the development agenda, propelled flood control projects to the top of the government’s infrastructure priorities. These new priorities converged in the approval of the World Bank-Financed Flood Management Master Plan for Metro Manila and Surrounding Suburbs in 2012, which aims to strengthen flood resilience by implementing a set of structural and non-structural measures, initially through the Metro Manila Flood Management Project, its first major phase. The disaster resilience agenda catalyzed the eviction push that characterized the hydraulic infrastructural turn in post-Ondoy Manila, escalating evictions via the production of the “danger zone” (Alvarez and Cardenas, 2019) and the parallel deployment of benevolence as a technology of slum evictions (Alvarez, 2019).

Expert explanations of the Ondoy et al. devastation portrayed slums as both culpable for and vulnerable to flooding, producing anti-slum discourses of flood, disaster, and
climate risk, and reigniting a decades-old commitment to expel informal settlements along Manila’s waterways (Alvarez and Cardenas, 2019). The state and its experts invoked waterway rehabilitation, the resumption of delayed flood control works, the implementation of the Master Plan, pre-emptive evacuation, and housing provision, to argue for slum clearance. This assemblage of solutions to the flooding problem synthesized resentments toward slum culpability and sympathies for vulnerability, which braided a coherent and persuasive rationale for slum clearance.

Demarcating the marginal spaces in which the urban poor live as “danger zones,” a fundamental disaster risk management category, was crucial to enforcing the broad swaths of evictions that facilitate infrastructural space-making, disaster-proofing, and peripheralization (Alvarez and Cardenas, 2019). Hinging urban futures on a confluence of urgent causes around infrastructure portrayed “danger zone” evictions as a necessary and inevitable act of saving vulnerable lives in the face of climate emergency (Alvarez, 2019). At the same time, the mass eviction was re-scripted as both a large-scale pre-emptive evacuation program and a participatory social housing program that infused the expulsion of urban poor with benevolence that proved difficult to assail (Alvarez, 2019). The flooding problem was a consequence of the failure of hydraulic and flood-defense infrastructure caused by the degradation of the waterway that was the result of slum obstruction that undergirded the disaster resilience agenda (Alvarez and Cardenas, 2019) and aggravated unfulfilled modernist imaginary of infrastructure as space-integrating control of flows (Saguin, 2017).

“Danger zone” evictions reveal an important paradox for housing politics. Although residents and allies remained opposed to evictions in principle, the early 2010s witnessed a tempered position and a pragmatic retreat. Communities did not categorically reject slum clearance, which they interpreted as removing informal littoral settlements and distinguished from evictions. Relocation housing was the caveat. The state’s elaborate case for clearing “danger zones” presented an opportunity for political claims-making: to demand, with the same urgency, the provision of adequate on-site and in-city relocation housing for the vulnerable poor. But as residents and their advocates succeeded in strengthening social safeguards governing slum clearance, they, too, became instrumental in humanizing and enforcing evictions, for the very protocols that protected informal settlers from the violence of eviction ultimately worked to legitimize their dispossession (Alvarez, 2019).

We see flood control infrastructure and “danger zone” evictions emerging as a powerful site and tool for accomplishing both “incomplete” and new aspirations of city-making. “Danger zone” evictions enable the functioning, maintenance, repair, and construction of infrastructure in the city, while simultaneously necessitating movements to spaces in the peripheries where infrastructure struggles take on a different meaning.

**Peripheral Infrastructure in “Death Zones”**

Urban poor expulsions produce different infrastructural stories in the periphery, where resettlement sites have created new modes of urban life. Various modalities in the resettlement process emerged in Manila, wherein in-city or off-city lands were acquired for developer-constructed housing projects or resident-led incremental housing. Tens of thousands of families from the city have been relocated to more than a dozen off-city
resettlement zones, 20–40 km outside Metro Manila, in remote, inaccessible and poorly serviced areas chosen by private developers for availability of cheap land. Private developers have taken on a primary role in the provision of social housing and associated infrastructure in the periphery (Arcilla, 2018).

Residents describe these housing units as incomplete and substandard, requiring significant improvements in the building structure and access to basic services (Dizon, 2019; Jensen et al., 2020; Ortega, 2020). Developers mediate access to water and electricity infrastructural networks, resulting in low-quality, interrupted, and overpriced services that transform relocatees to homeowner-consumers who pay and work more for infrastructural access than those in the city (Arcilla, 2018; Ortega, 2020). The uninhabitability of these resettlement sites have prompted residents, uprooted from their socioeconomic networks, to refer to them as “death zones” (Dalisay and De Guzman, 2016; Ortega, 2020).

A diverse range of incremental infrastructural practices enable residents to inhabit these “death zones,” relying on multiple strategies of negotiations and adjustments that reshape available socio-material configurations (Lawhon et al., 2018; Simone, 2018). These have included tapping into the electric network, securing solar panels for off-grid power, relying on alternative water intermediaries, sustaining livelihood enterprises, growing food and herbs through community gardens, participating in estate design and management, and striking external partnerships with non-state groups for off-network infrastructure connections (Galuszka, 2020; Ortega, 2020; Saguin, 2020; Seki, 2020).

In Pandi, a massive resettlement site north of Manila where many “danger zone” evictees reside, a movement to occupy idle social housing emerged in 2017 as a challenge to the infrastructural violence of relocation. Thousands of residents disillusioned by peripheral life mobilized occupation as a strategy, a kind of politics that seized changing circumstances and was enabled by conjunctural juxtapositions of groups of evicted urban poor. They deployed occupation as a key strategy, learning from and inspired by connections with longstanding movements on housing and infrastructure in the city center (Dizon, 2019).

These diverse infrastructural practices and struggles of mobilizing claims in death zones support arguments that infrastructure exerts a force around which various stories, interests and capacities gather, and enables a rethinking of political possibilities surrounding connections (Amin, 2014; Lawhon et al., 2018; Simone, 2018). Emergent and provisional juxtapositions in the periphery as heterogeneous landscapes present a different set of conditions of possibilities for the evicted in the kinds of rooms for maneuver they work with, and in the new spaces they are forced to reshape through acts of incremental accretions (Caldeira, 2017; Simone, 2018). Viewing peripheral practices also entails situating these diverse stories within broader processes that conjoin eviction and resettlement, where infrastructure becomes a central locus of multiple modes of co-production of urban space.

**Conclusion**

Building on the legacy of splintering urbanism, we explored the tensions between two modes of infrastructural space-making in Manila—an infrastructure push that the urban poor encounters as dispossessive, and an infrastructural absence that they
encounter as vital to survival amid peripheral uninhabitability. We conclude with some reflections on the kinds of urban politics that emerge from engaging with these paradoxical infrastructural stories as a way of extending the spatial and political implications of splintering urbanism.

Urban politics takes on variegated forms, sometimes cohering as a coordinated movement, but most of the time marked by everyday relations with disparate “rhythms of endurance” in people’s attempts to ensure survival (Simone, 2018). For residents of the Pandi resettlement, their occupation rendered visible the broader crisis that weaved struggles in the peripheries with those in the city, where “danger zone” residents continue to call for humane living conditions while refusing resettlement to “death zones.” For many others in the margins facing different peripheral conditions, infrastructure remains a key site that engenders differentiated modes of improvisation and rhythms of practices of attending to livelihood needs, whose diverse energies may be harnessed to build a common political ground (Simone, 2018).

The militant and incremental struggles for infrastructural access to services in the peripheries are distinct yet inseparable from similar movements against infrastructural evictions in the city center. Keeping tensions between paradoxical modes of infrastructure generates relational politics that strings and “sees” the co-constitutive dynamics between micro-practices and broader urban questions of spatial injustice (McFarlane and Silver 2017; Simone and Pieterse, 2017). Infrastructural paradoxes thus stitch multiple connections within and across cities that extend the analytical concerns and spatial lexicon of splintering urbanism while expanding the political possibilities of reshaping urban life.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on Contributors**

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