



Kian Goh, *Form and Flow: The Spatial Politics of Urban Resilience and Climate Justice*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780262543057 (paper); ISBN: 9780262367059 (ebook)

I should probably start this review off by revealing that I am not a designer. This is important to mention because at its heart, Kian Goh’s *Form and Flow: The Spatial Politics of Urban Resilience and Climate Justice* is a book that uses social science to write a love letter to design. In it, she takes a snapshot of what design is today, particularly design taking place at the interface between the urban impacts of climate crisis and longstanding issues of social equity. But throughout, this book is also an ode to what design could be, to what Goh earnestly hopes design will become: a field that views itself as a “terrain of contestation”, one that leads to the creation of “insurgent urban landscapes” and, eventually, new more just modes of urban development.

Empirically, *Form and Flow* is an incisive comparative study of two post-disaster urban design projects, the “Rebuild by Design” competition that took place in New York City in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and Jakarta’s “Great Garuda” giant sea wall plan that took shape after major flooding events in 2007 and 2013. Chapters 2-4 detail Goh’s fieldwork and findings. In keeping with the mores of contemporary comparative work as well as her focus on the design project as unit of analysis rather than the city, she has largely avoided relying on place-based distinctions to organise chapters (e.g. there is no single chapter on NYC or Jakarta), choosing to focus on three cross-cutting themes instead. Both Lefebvrian and political ecology influences are clear in her choice of themes: Chapter Two, titled “Nature of Contestation”, provides an overview of both design projects along with their socio-spatial and socio-ecological contexts, major actors, and projected impacts on social equity concerns in both cities. Chapter Three, on the “Nature of Flows”, focuses on the heavy Dutch influence in both design projects. It uses a network analysis lens to understand the role of one Dutch city in particular, Rotterdam, on

the quickly evolving global industry surrounding urban water management. Chapter Four, “Plans and Counterplans”, uses the network analysis of the previous chapter to explain how design is not only practised and implemented in contemporary urban resilience planning, but how it accommodates counter-demands and ideas from impacted communities. Together, these chapters (along with the Epilogue) are generally the most relevant for water management practitioners interested in the Rebuild by Design and Great Garuda giant sea wall projects, and the most accessible for advanced undergraduate students looking to learn more about environmental planning and design and the politics behind urban resilience.

The remaining chapters, the Introduction, Chapter One, Chapter Five, and the methodological appendix, are the go-to portions of the book for theorists and those looking for more information on Goh’s research design and epistemological framework. The Introduction, “Climate Justice and Urban Futures”, is used to position herself in the literature and preview the primary contributions of the research. Those familiar with Goh’s previous work (viz. Angelo and Goh 2021; Goh 2020) will recognise her description of cities as actually unbounded objects for which a planetary-scale analysis is more appropriate. Sensitive to critiques against similar “planetary urbanisation” perspectives that argue this theoretical purview does not pay enough attention to the agency found within everyday life and lived experience (Peake et al. 2018), Goh infuses her position with insights from theorists concerned with postcolonial urbanism, embodiment, everyday life, environmental justice, and more (e.g. Ananya Roy, Robert Bullard, Anne Rademacher, among others). Indeed, organisations working to ensure community needs and priorities are heard, and (ideally) accounted for, in both Rebuild by Design and the Great Garuda project loom large throughout the entire book, a testament to Goh’s investment in centring the political possibilities embedded in everyday struggles within the broader framework of planetary urbanisation. Chapter One, on “Disparate Yet Interconnected Cities”, subsequently goes on to introduce the contexts, relationalities, justifications, and strategies for comparison

across the three cities of NYC, Rotterdam, and Jakarta. Chapter Five, following on the heels of the three empirical chapters, presents a “Political Ecology of Design” to readers—a summation of the project and articulation of generalisable contributions to theory, with a heavy emphasis on synthesising the scalar and spatial relationships between design projects, networks, and climate strategies through use of tables, diagrams, and typologies. Lastly, graduate students, those teaching methods courses, and researchers interested in conducting their own relational comparative studies will find the methodological appendix particularly useful and worth spending time with. Here Goh lays out exactly how she conceives of relational comparison, why it is necessary to move beyond traditional comparative frameworks and work relationally through sites, as well as a very transparent guide to how she has done so herself.

In all, this book provides major contributions to the interdisciplinary world of urban studies in both theoretical and empirical aspects. Theoretically, Goh blends elements of planetary urbanisation with concern and deep attention paid to the politics of marginalisation and everyday life in NYC and Jakarta. Empirically, she provides a contemporary mapping of the multi-scalar geographies of climate urbanism and global water management. Through it all, however, she steadfastly argues for the pivotal role of design. Indeed, if I had to identify a theory of change in Goh’s work, it would be design. More specifically, she argues for the importance of rethinking how (and which) “flows” of urban development discourse and power influence the design of material urban “forms”, making the case for a strengthened incorporation of the voices and needs of those living on the margins.

The epistemological framework Goh uses to draw the conclusions she does about the power and potentialities of design is also key to understanding *Form and Flow* as a piece of social science research. Insight into this framework is found in the following passage (p.18):

Broadly stated, social science research is to understand and explain. Design is to envision new possibilities and futures. This is a somewhat reductive way to make the distinction, but not a trivial one.

While Goh's book is undoubtedly a masterly excavation into the practices, processes, and politics of contemporary climate urbanism, this passage makes it clear that the epistemology underlying the research design and operationalisation of the project has attributed transformative agency almost entirely to the praxis of design, seemingly denying similar potential to the work of social science. Readers can discern this most clearly in the times she reflects on her own work, both as researcher and as designer. Goh weaves in occasional brief reflections on her positionality and what she understands her role as researcher to be. For example, she reveals that while "many of the conceptual approaches ... delineated here come from those researching and writing from the privilege of vaunted, relatively wealthy Euro-American academic institutions, often from prominent white, male scholars", she nevertheless focuses "on centering and elevating the voices of activists and community members" in her research writeup (p.19, 20). Later on she explains that when it comes to "sense-making of lineages of urban, environmental, design, and political theories", hers is "a reflexive, unstable position" that "reinforces the importance and power of 'seeing' across and through multiple modes of knowledge and from multiple view points" (p.191, 192). However, her approach is much less circumspect when discussing her design work, particularly her design firm's project with the Red Hook Initiative, one of the only spaces in the area to retain power in the days following Hurricane Sandy, and with space flexible enough to function as a community hub and soup kitchen. Here she provides unambiguous insights into why their design of the space was so successful and how this project can serve as a small scale example of the type of design that "allows us to consider that crucial

weaving of social and spatial factors—in ways that are particular to the place, position, and agency of systemically marginalized urban residents” (p.147).

I certainly look forward to Goh’s next step in this conversation with her forthcoming co-edited collection on *Just Urban Design: The Struggle for a Public City* (Goh et al. 2022). Nevertheless, and to return to my opening salvo, given that Goh is herself both a researcher and a designer, what would happen if she also recognised and attributed agency and transformative potential to role of social science—rather than just relegating it to the explanatory? I can’t help but wonder how her project would change. Perhaps one of the largest building blocks of the project to be reconsidered would be her conceptualisation of relationality. As it stands, relationality in *Form and Flow* pertains largely to the connections and dynamics between the urban development, policy, and economic networks the design projects are embedded in. By reconsidering the transformative potential of social science research, and thus herself as researcher, relationality in the project could move beyond the explanatory power of the network to also include considerations of the relationships and dynamics Goh herself is in a position to facilitate. This could be in terms of empirical relations between Jakarta and US-based housing activists, for example, or thinking about how theoretical contributions arising from community tenants and organisers could be used to further refine and develop her admittedly elite-derived conceptual framework.

In what I consider to be one of the most motivating passages of the entire book, Goh concludes her discussion of the Red Hook Initiative design project, and the chapter on plans and counterplans, with the following thought, in which I would like to suggest the role of design and social science projects are actually interchangeable (p.147, 148):

So it is not that one project changes much—but this one project is successfully embedded in a broader process of organizing for social and political change ... Design is political,

and intertwined with foundational ideas about society ... When invoked, understood, and practiced as part of building a movement for political change, it can take its place in visualizing and countering the structures—both physical and systemic—that bind people and places in precarious social and environmental conditions. Design can be part of resistance, a mode of political organizing.

With *Form and Flow*, Goh has admirably, and lovingly, challenged the entire field of design to take their seats in the construction of more just futures. She is also one of the few people in a position as both social science researcher and designer, to be able to take up the dual endeavour of envisioning both social science and design as mutually filled with transformative potential. Not only is *Form and Flow* required reading in this respect, but I very much look forward to exploring how this relationship continues to unfold in her future work.

References

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