



# Urban Times: Temporal Topographies and Non-scalable Cities

Morten Nielsen

To cite this article: Morten Nielsen (2016): Urban Times: Temporal Topographies and Non-scalable Cities, *Ethnos*, DOI: [10.1080/00141844.2016.1206602](https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2016.1206602)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2016.1206602>



Published online: 09 Sep 2016.



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## INTRODUCTION

# Urban Times: Temporal Topographies and Non-scalable Cities<sup>†</sup>

**Morten Nielsen**

Aarhus University, Denmark

**ABSTRACT** *Whereas 'urban' is usually considered as designating a particular spatial environment composed by the agglomeration of human and non-human elements, the notion of 'time' suggests a processual dynamic of rhythms and velocities. However, if we take as a speculative premise that the oxymoronic idea of 'urban times' does capture a particular experiential modality, the analytical challenge is obviously to explore what its status might be and how it can be subjected to anthropological examination. In this article, I introduce temporal topographies as an analytical heuristics for examining the oxymoronic constellation 'urban times'. Taken to constitute partially coordinated complexes of spatio-temporal rhythms, temporal topographies assert themselves as theories that cities make of themselves without being able to totalize the spatio-temporal landscape. It is, however, precisely because they are constantly on the verge of breaking down that temporal topographies give to urban life a particular and awkward potency.*

**KEYWORDS** *Urban, time, temporal topography, Maputo, urban development, scale*

Space is nothing but the inscription of time in the world, spaces are the realizations, inscriptions in the simultaneity of the external world of a series of times, the rhythms of the city, the rhythms of urban population ... the city will only be rethought and

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<sup>†</sup>The publication of this special issue marks the conclusion of a long preparation and planning phase. The seven contributions are based on papers that were first presented at a conference on 'Urban Times' in March 2010 at the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies, University of St. Andrews.

reconstructed on its current ruins when we have properly understood that the city is the deployment of time. (Lefebvre 1967 in Kofman & Lebas 1996: 16)

## Introduction

With this special issue of *Ethnos*, the ambition is to explore the conceptual and analytical potentials of conjoining 'urban' and 'time' in an intentionally oxymoronic assemblage. Whereas 'urban' is usually considered as designating a particular spatial environment composed by the agglomeration of human and non-human elements (Brenner 2013), the notion of 'time' suggests a processual dynamic of overlapping and partially enveloped rhythms and velocities (Adam 2004). We thus have a distinction between relations of juxtaposition and exteriority based on a spatial (and quantitative) trope versus relations of envelopment and interiority based on a temporal (and qualitative) trope. However, if we take as a speculative premise that the oxymoronic idea of 'urban times' does in fact capture a particular experiential modality, the analytical challenge is obviously to explore what its social, cosmological and, indeed, political status might be. Featuring articles by Huon Wardle on the disjuncture between transcendent (atemporal) spirituality and everyday temporality; Adam Reed on the articulation of often hidden temporal connections between humans and animals; Andrew Irving on the inner temporalities of people living with HIV/AIDS as they walk through the streets of New York; Anne Line Dalsgaard on the contrasting temporalities of debt-relations between giving a loan and paying it back; Morten Axel Pedersen on the spatial topography of debt-relations that endure over extended periods of time; Alberto Corsín Jiménez on the politics of time when based on mortgage-relations; and, finally, Nigel Rapport on the uncertainty and discomfiture of the passing of time, it focuses precisely on the unstable and often awkward relationship between time and space in different urban environments throughout the world.

The ethnographic accounts in this special issue focus in particular on how cities continuously generate provisional spatio-temporal configurations that give to urban life a certain kind of directionality and structure. From the contraction and relaxation of Ulaanbaatar's urban landscape caused by new forms of debt economies (Pedersen 2016) to the trajectories traced through the streets of New York through people's recollections of places and things (Irving 2016), these spatio-temporal configurations assert themselves almost as theories that cities make of themselves: through the amassing of persons,

things and ideas, cities seem to generate certain rhythmic synchronizations of social life which, however, are too loosely coordinated to fully dominate the urban landscape. As we learn from the individual chapters, however, it is precisely because these spatio-temporal configurations are constantly on the verge of breaking down that they give to urban life a particular and awkward potency. In what follows of this introduction, I approach these spatio-temporal configurations as *temporal topographies* that undo the separation of time and space. While they invest different urban milieu with their particular rhythmic qualities, the lack of internal consistency nevertheless continues to disrupt the stabilization of urban engagements.

In order for temporal topographies to impress on social life a certain temporal aesthetics, they noticeably draw different spaces and times towards each other that pulsate with different material rhythms, social orientations and affective drives (cf. De Boeck 2015). As such, the senses of time that emerge as different temporal topographies collide and become partially interwoven are not detached or separate from the forces that bring about the transformations. Time is, we might say, the particular aesthetics that articulates and is articulated by socio-physical transformations: it is the form through which social life is captured by transformations without itself ever being fully captured. The concreteness of space – the material stuff of social life – thus always involves a certain timeliness or duration (Grosz 2001). It opens itself to time, as it were, through the manipulation of change and the circulation of temporal imageries that this gives rise to (Massey 1999). As in Madrid, where the financialization of space reconfigures the progressive dynamics of urban life (Corsín Jimenéz 2016), it is probably in the world's expanding cities that the collisions and clashes between different temporal topographies – between different ways in which space opens itself to time – can be observed most acutely. In fact, given that cities often operate on the basis of change as a driving force, they offer a unique glimpse into the workings of time as an aesthetics of interweaving temporal topographies. What I shall argue in this introduction, then, is that while such configurations of time do orient social life in the cities in multiple and often contrasting ways, they do not impose themselves as overarching political rationalities (cf. Collier 2009). Rather, and this is paradoxically also their strength, temporal topographies intervene in social life as 'limited universalisms' that are constantly on the verge of breaking down (Nielsen & Simone 2016).

I begin by outlining the collapsing of scales that is required in order to operationalize temporal topographies as analytical heuristics. As volatile spatio-tem-

poral configurations, temporal topographies disrupt the conventional distinction between otherwise separate scales (say, of time and space) and offer instead a reading of the city from 'within' the phenomenon being studied. Rather than gauging an empirical phenomenon in terms of a detached scale, the analysis has to move at the same pace as the former. By outlining how temporal topographies open space to time, I then explore how temporal topographies function as 'limited universalisms', which suggest how social life may be coordinated throughout the city. Still, given their lack of internal consistency, temporal topographies are constantly on the verge of breaking down, which is what gives to urban life its productive but also awkward potentials.

### The Non-scalable City

In the late 1930s, urban sociologists associated with the Chicago School delineated the contours of the 'urban' with reference to three sociological properties; those being large population size, high population density and high levels of demographic heterogeneity (Wirth 1969 [1937]). For the Chicago School researchers, these particular qualities distinguished urban zones from all other settlement areas and thereby also delineated the empirical unit to be sociologically analysed. Jumping some 70 odd years ahead, the morphological characteristics of the city seem to have fundamentally changed. At the turn of the century, Amin and Thrift (2002: 1) described the challenges of analysing the city as a singular object of study:

The city is everywhere and in everything. If the urbanized world now is a chain of metropolitan areas connected by places/corridors of communication ... then what is not the urban?

Reading through the impressive body of scholarly work on the dynamics of urban social life that has been published during the last two decades, it is, I believe, possible to give a tentative explanation for Amin and Thrift's concern although, as I shall shortly argue, it might be partially unfounded. Without ignoring the importance of macro-economic and general socio-political factors, a number of contemporary urban scholars have charted the contingent effects of what Doreen Massey has recently called 'throwntogetherness' (2005: 149–161), that is, the disjunctive connections being continuously made and unmade between the human and non-human in places of ever-shifting constellations of cross-cutting trajectories, invisible orderings and infrastructural affects (Holston 1991; Little & Lundin de Coloane 1993; Corsín Jiménez 2003; De Boeck

& Plissart 2004; Simone 2004; Rodgers 2006; Pedersen 2012; Ureta 2013; Reed 2015). Through in-depth studies of provisional interdependencies established between strangers, the permeability of seemingly hardened political machineries and the shifting repertoires of people cast in unknown and potentially dangerous milieu, this recent body of work explores the always emergent and volatile character of urban life in global cities throughout the world. As if in response to Jennifer Robinson's recent call for a shift of vision to the 'world of always moving spaces' (1998: D5), these evocative accounts convincingly conjure the dynamic spatio-temporal qualities of a convoluted landscape composed of interweaving bodies, contingent desires and rhythmic forces. Hence, what Amin and Thrift considered as the watering down of the city's primary qualities might perhaps be considered as a strategic collapsing of scales that results in the dissolution of the city as a configuration of seemingly distinct and well-defined layers of social life. In its place, we are invited to explore the multiple ways in which provisional temporal topographies erupt, take effect and eventually mutate to become with other configurations of people, things and ideas. In her recent work on 'ordinary affects' (2007: 44–45), Stewart writes that,

Rogue intensities roam the streets of the ordinary. There are all the lived, yet unassimilated, impacts of things, all the fragments of experience left hanging. Everything left unframed by the stories of what makes a life pulses at the edges of things. All the excesses and extra effects unwittingly propagated by plans and projects and routines of all kinds surge, experiment, and meander. They pull things in their wake. They incite truth claims, confusions, acceptance, endurance, tall tales, circuits of deadness and desire, dull and risky moves, and the most ordinary forms of watchfulness.

Although Stewart focuses on the affects of everyday life irrespective of physical locations, her account could be taken as an indicator of how urban configurations emerge out of the multiple temporal and spatial determinations that are momentarily connected through infinite flows of 'mutual relatedness' (Cooper 1998: 108).

The turn towards the sensuous layers of urban politics has stirred both critical and engaged debates on the appropriateness of collapsing otherwise separate scales that measure and proportion, say, the spatial and the temporal registers or even the affective and political domains of urban life and on the consequences such approaches might have for our broader understanding of what 'urban times' might entail. To take but one example, in 'Theses on Urbanization' (Brenner 2013), Neil Brenner argues that the recent 'contextual-

ist turn that has become fashionable among many urbanists who have been influenced by Latourian actor-network theory and associated neo-Deleuzian concepts of assemblage' is, indeed, particularly problematic (2013: 92). Although acknowledging the possibility for partially circumventing 'some of the blind spots of earlier metatheoretical positions' (Brenner 2013), Brenner also argues that the majority of these 'contextualist' works apply a conceptualization of the urban that is 'attached to an extraordinarily diffuse array of referents, connotations, and conditions, all too frequently derived from everyday categories of practice, which are then unreflexively converted into analytical commitments'. There is, of course, a lot to say about Brenner's interesting contribution and although I personally do subscribe to a contextualist approach based on a strategic collapsing of scales, I also think that the critique is relevant. By levelling out the proportional differences between, say, macro-economy, urban politics and everyday hustling, analytical generalization does seem to constitute a conceptual impossibility given that the general is already within the concrete. Still, whereas Brenner is concerned about the diffuse conceptualization of the urban caused by its analytical absorption of everyday categories of practices, I believe that the problem lies on the 'inside' of the concept, as it were (cf. Nielsen 2012). With the suggestion that social life is fundamentally characterized by its permeability, it does appear as if everything can be connected to everything else through what the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has recently called 'disjunctive syntheses' (2010): things, persons and ideas chart different temporal and spatial trajectories across the urban landscape and it is consequently the traces of their disjunctive intersections that can be taken to constitute the city.

What I wish to argue is that this contextual approach to the city, which, as already stated, I also believe to contain the most vibrant analytical potentials for capturing the spatio-temporal dynamics of urban life today, contains a 'paradox of immanence', so to speak. If everything can be connected to everything else (virtually if not actually!) there is no outside to the urban configurations. As spatio-temporal assemblages of persons, things and ideas come together, mutate and eventually disintegrate, every entity in the world is a potential agent that might be 'translated' by the incoherent ordering mechanisms that hold the configuration momentarily together (cf. Callon 1986). In a sense, it might be argued that this paradox of immanence has arisen because the 'contextualist' approach to the city (*pace* Brenner 2013) takes its object of study too seriously. With the increased amassing of bodies, money, politics and technologies in the world's global cities, the challenge is to lock the analysis

to objects of study that undergo rapid and often unexpected transformations (cf. Boyer & Howe 2015).

Needless to say, the importance of aligning the analytical approach with the transformative qualities of urban life is something that urbanists have been struggling with at least since researchers associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Rhodesia were forced to develop new methodological and analytical approaches to capture the dynamics of the swelling mining towns of the Copperbelt in the 1940s and 1950s (Gluckman 1945; Colson 1977; Brown 1979; Kapferer 2005). By thus allowing the analysis to move at the same pace as the empirical phenomenon from which it originated (cf. Lefebvre 1996: 219), the increasing accretion of entities in the global cities has invariably had considerable effect on the theoretical conceptualization of urban life. The 'contextualist' approach discussed by Brenner might thus be considered as a direct outcome of this heightened sensitivity towards the interweaving of the structural and affective qualities of empirical data. Still, we need to think very carefully about whether the emphasis on connectivity and permeability shrouds in a fog of analytical obscurity certain aspects of social life that oppose immediate integration. Could it not be, for example, that those temporal topographies that seem to be composed out of the amassing of persons, things, velocities, rhythms and ideas are structured equally around clashes and collisions (cf. Nielsen 2007; 2014; Holston 2014)? To take one example, for urban Pentecostals living under dire socio-economic conditions in contemporary Haiti, everyday life is structured around a seemingly irresolvable spatio-temporal conflict between the shifting velocities of everyday hardship and the transcendent atemporality of the spiritual realm (Wardle 2016). As Wardle reminds us, it is precisely because these different spatio-temporal realms do *not* merge that new and often contradictory configurations of urban personhood arise. And, still, while urban life may be scaled in terms of different temporal topographies, as we learn from Reed's discussion on inter-species encounters at the London Zoo (2016), it is through the continuous shifts of directionality and temporal orientation across the former that cities are inhabited.

What the contributions in this special issue propose, then, is not merely that the swelling of cities gives rise to new and unstable connections between bodies, rhythms, sites and things. Rather, cities acquire their unique potency precisely through clashes and collisions between different temporal topographies that are constantly on the verge of breaking down.



### Temporal Topographies as Limited Universalisms

By opening up space to time, temporal topographies transcend the limitations of their phenomenological corporeality. Given the lack of internal consistency and spatial fixation, they are indeterminable in relation to the city as such but precisely of the same reason suggest particular ways in which social life may be organized. In a nutshell, they are indicative of an apriori function without the force of an apriori (Laruelle 2011). As the city's pulsing vibrations, temporal topographies invest themselves in other modalities of urban life without completely taking over their specificity. In Madrid, for example, new 'discontinuous vibrations of matter' (Parisi & Goodman 2008: 3) can be felt throughout the urban landscape by the physical imprints of durational mortgage flows (Corsín Jimenéz 2016). Hence, while articulating a repetitive continuity that suggests internal organization and structure, temporal topographies are perhaps best considered as a kind of rhythmic potentiality that intervenes in different places, which come to reverberate with the spatio-temporal qualities of the former without completely succumbing to its force. As such, they are 'limited universalisms' that emits particular rhythmic velocities without having the force to invest the entire urban landscape with their particular spatio-temporal qualities.

While temporal topographies thus essentially undo the split between space and time (cf. Whitehead 1978), they do themselves constantly clash and collide. Early modernization theorists, such as Simmel and Tönnies, were among the first observers of urban environments to acknowledge that the speeding up of social life in the cities, the bombardment of increasingly isolated urbanites by cascades of information and the emergence of new systems of time-discipline for the synchronization of work tasks cause continuous splits and fractures in the spatio-temporal fabric (Bouchet 1998; see also Thompson 1967). Indeed, as argued by Sassen (1999), cities are places where different temporalities come into friction. Urban life is being guided by different and often ill-coordinated technologies of power (Smart 2001; Nielsen 2011; Das & Walton 2015) and, still, the amassing of the human and the non-human in the cities lead to an intensification of rhythms, velocities and speeds, which cannot maintain internal stability over long periods of (historical) time. But could it not be that urban sociality also need temporal topographies to constantly be on the verge of breaking down? Is there not a particular and perhaps awkward productivity in the workings of such limited universalisms, which assert themselves as suggestive theories that cities make of themselves without, however, being able to totalize the spatio-temporal landscape? Let me give one example

taken from the classic literature on urban migration in sub-Saharan Africa: During the 1940s and 1950s, researchers associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Rhodesia documented how urban coexistence of otherwise opposing tribes was rendered possible because of the gradual disintegration of kinship-based hierarchies within and beyond rural villages (Turner 1957; Epstein 1981). In other words, it was possible for these groups to interact and establish new urban collectives not merely because of the strong orientation towards the city, but also because of the partial collapse of previous spatio-temporal identificational structures and orderings. Space opens itself to time, I will argue, precisely because the configuration is too vaguely structured to retain consistency. Given their relatively weak coordination, temporal topographies constantly fail to live up to their own image. Rather, in an almost iconoclastic manner, they deform their own theorizations of the city and disrupt its durational flows. In these instances, ‘time no longer flows. It shoots up’ (Bachelard 1939: 175 in Perraudin 2008: 476).

The contributions in this special issue of *Ethnos* each emphasize the often awkward and not always advantageous productivity that emerges from the collisions and clashes within and between different temporal topographies. We begin with Huon Wardle’s contribution, ‘Times of the self in Kingston, Jamaica’. To the members of the Jamaican spiritist church ‘Revival Zion’, a temporal disjuncture exists between the staccato-like rhythm of everyday hardship and the immutable time of the spiritual. Whereas the detached atemporality of the spiritual may appear almost as a container for the flow of the everyday, the relationship is set in motion by spiritual gifts that members receive from the Revival angels. In the course of deciding whether or not to act on the gifts, which are both unpredictable and potentially harmful, a certain temporal openness is momentarily established to recipients, who seek to master the flow of time by engaging with the capricious forces of the spiritual. In Adam Reed’s article ‘Zoo Times’, temporal (re)orientation emerges from the ongoing oscillation between different spatio-temporal scales that are being activated by regular visitors to London Zoo. During visitors’ encounters with animals in the zoo, the spatio-temporal qualities of the relationship were scaled in terms of an alleged mutual identification. Significantly, through such inter-species encounters, visitors would activate unique personal temporalities, which transcended the parameters of human interactions. Rather, a hidden temporal connection seemed to emerge, which was implicated in their shared origins. As Reed tells us, since the momentary shared temporality was an outcome of the visitors’ spatio-temporal scalings of the physical space, it was constantly

being threatened by the fear that time may be up for the very idea of the zoo. Irving continues the ethnographic exploration of different and often contrastive temporalities wedged into cities' material fabric in his article 'New York Stories'. Focusing on the physical trajectories through New York's urban landscape of people living with HIV/AIDS, Irving maps out the unique temporal universes that arise as people imprint their histories, emotions and concerns into city. By so doing, Irving reminds us that physical surroundings are not to be considered as the inert ground upon which social life figures. The layout of the city is better understood as incorporating – or structured by – the rhythms and vibrations of people's inner expressions, dialogues and memories. In 'Time Will Tell', Dalsgaard explores the incompatible and disjunctive debt-based temporalities of lending out money and taking back the loan in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Recife in the northeast of Brazil. From the moment money is lend out, time is bifurcated between credit and debt: whereas credit relates to the dynamics of the present, debt is cast into a future that cannot be known. By reflecting on her own experiences with lending out money to a friend, Dalsgaard emphasizes the relational fragility of bifurcated debt-based temporalities. People invest in relationships, Dalsgaard tells us, and in an unstable socio-economic environment, this invariable implies that disillusionment (*decepção*) is a constant factor threatening to disrupt the flow of everyday life. The spatio-temporal qualities of debt-relations are further examined in Pedersen's article 'Debt as an urban chronotope in Mongolia'. In present-day Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, people move around because of debt-relations; either they are searching for those in debt to them or, equally likely, they are trying to escape those to whom they are in debt. Pedersen wonders why his Mongolian friends continued to enter into new networks of obligations while at the same time knowing that loans were seldom paid back. Through a reading of Mongolia's recent history, Pedersen argues that such seemingly irrational debt-relations should be considered as symptomatic of the post-socialist city as such; as unstable temporal topographies they are still beating with the irregular rhythm of a deregularized post-socialist transition phase, where no one could be expected to repay what was owed. In 'Mortgage *durée*', Corsín Jiménez examines the temporality of debt economies by imagining an entire city as a mortgage environment. Rather than focusing on individual debt-relations, then, Corsín Jiménez wants to consider the purchase of thinking through the urban condition as a temporal realm whose eruptions, fractures and folds follow the curvatures of mortgage economies. By so doing, debt is displaced from the individual to the city and from indi-

vidual obligations to a broader temporalized landscape structured by acceleration, apocalypse and conspiracy. Rapport concludes the special issue with his commentary 'Discomfiture in Time'. Acknowledging the sense of distress and also need for certainty that comes with living in transitory urban milieu, Rapport asks how we might analytically allow for 'the temporal city as embodying both the instability of creativity and of collapse?' According to Rapport, we need to think of the temporal city as pertaining not to any particular classification or community. It is an existential condition, rather, which is the domain of anyone. Rapport thus invites us to consider new ways of charting this urban excess; that is, how urbanites author their own individual versions of themselves in cities composed by overlapping, colliding and often disjunctive temporal topographies.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the continuous support of Professor Nigel Rapport, Director of the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies and for the organization skills of Maria Molde, the conference coordinator.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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