



# Reconceptualizing Urban Planning and Development Assistance

**Asha Ghosh**

The future is urban. Over 50% of the world's population lives in cities today, and possibly 75% by 2050, according to some UN projections. Planning for urban growth will be crucial for sustainable development and to address the most pressing urban problems – including climate change, inequality, and health. Urban planners have the potential to play a key role in facilitating innovative and necessary solutions through infrastructure planning, zoning, and other planning approaches. However, due to the nature of their day-to-day responsibilities to enforce regulations and the political impetus for short-term planning, planners are constrained in what they can achieve. Moreover, planning is currently a silo-ed enterprise, with limited integration of different disciplinary approaches to development and decision making. This is partly due to how the field has evolved and that pedagogical approaches are rooted in architecture and urban design. Reconceptualizing the field of urban planning offers the potential to establish a more pivotal role for planners to facilitate equitable and sustainable urban growth and redesign by expanding the scope of training and the role of the planner within local government. The future urban planner must be trained to facilitate projects and decision making that draw upon expertise from multiple disciplines, requiring an understanding of diverse and divergent perspectives in pursuit of solving problems. What are their skills, areas of expertise, and what do we expect from this field in a world that will be primarily urban? It is in this context, that the discipline of urban planning requires reconceptualization.

Professionals in the field of development assistance share a lot in common with urban planning professionals. In both fields, practitioners aspire to find solutions to complex problems by drawing on expertise from several fields to devise an integrated approach to addressing social and (built and natural) environmental or resource problems. Likewise, solutions must regularly be adapted to address shifting economic, environmental, and social landscapes. Moreover, practitioners must adapt their approaches and skills to the particularities of each new place where they work. However, in academic settings these two fields are rarely intersect. And, in practice, development assistance focuses on higher level

government engagement while planners are embedded in local contexts allowing limited opportunities for engagement. Given the multitude of intensifying and related challenges the world is facing today, including but not limited to climate change, health, and equity concerns, both fields require new tools and approaches and a reconceptualization of purpose. In fact, a significant opportunity exists to more strongly address issues of equity and environmental concerns and to increase opportunities for community driven project design and implementation in these the two fields. Therefore, it is an opportune moment to





cooperation of urban governments and often the introduction of a special agency to channel funding and coordinate implementation. Within this context, in the larger urban areas, there is a plethora of agencies – including sector-wise line department offices (e.g. water, electricity, transportation), planning and development boards, industrial development boards, and social welfare departments, among others (e.g. metropolitan development agencies special-purpose vehicles). Coordinated 'planning' or coordination of development projects is challenging in the best of situations, and project-wise development is ultimately undertaken with the national finance boards responsible for allocating funds towards the various projects. In many contexts there has been an introduction of urban or metropolitan planning and development agencies, but even the purview of a planning and development agency is limited by both the overlaps between agencies and the silo-ed approach to urban issues.

Development assistance in the context of planning has included either a focus on community-based planning or on large scale infrastructure. In the case of infrastructure, the assistance has included an infusion of costs, guidelines, contractors, and other resources to push large projects forward. Local non-governmental organizations have vehemently opposed many of these projects from conceptualization to design to implementation. These



thereby focused on small scale infrastructure. The legal framework that mandates intergovernmental relationships is critical to the potential for local government to effectively plan, finance, and develop local projects.

In some of the countries where I was working, including Nepal, different interest groups engaged in heated debates on the appropriate structure for decentralization. I contributed to the Foundation's efforts to promote federalism in Nepal. A shift away from the unitary

informal communities. This question is critical to discussions on decentralization since local governments are often assumed to be best positioned to provide more equitable access to services and/or regulate provision by intermediaries. The findings suggested that decentralization, combined with pro-poor national policies, provide a basis for greater



## **Conclusion**

The dilemma of the planner is to find practical solutions to complex problems. How can the development needs, including for large-scale infrastructure, be realized in the growing cities of largely poor countries, and what is the role of development assistance in this context? The discipline of planning may in fact attract those who seek to make sense of what may seem like chaos. Unfortunately, in the attempt to make sense out of complex situations, there has been a tendency on the part of planners to utilize tools such as mapping to propose a legibility on landscapes that are otherwise multilayered, in flux, and being acted upon by a number of forces. As Scott suggests, "The utopian, immanent, and continually frustrated goal of the modern state is to reduce the chaotic, disorderly, constantly changing social reality beneath it to something more closely resembling the administrative grid of its observations. Much of the statecraft of the late 18th and 19th centuries was devoted to this project." (1998, p. 82). I argue that we need to shift the emphasis of planning from technocratic approaches, including mapping land use and the built environment to managing complex contexts with a multidisciplinary lens. This will require planners to more deeply engage with communities to facilitate creative and community-led solutions and support communities to navigate decision making with local and higher-level government officials.

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## Teaching and Field Work

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About a hundred years ago Bronislaw Malinowski famously established ethnographic fieldwork as the standard research method for academic Anthropology. According to Malinowski the goal of ethnography is, "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (Malinowski, 1922, p. 24). Outdated pronouns notwithstanding, rigorous ethnographic research has remained a priority for socio-cultural anthropologists into the 21st century and is now also more widely practiced in other disciplines as well as applied contexts, including international development work. On the other hand, contemporary anthropologists tend to approach ethnography very differently than more classically minded versions of "grasping the native's point of view." Here, I will present a sort of updated "Anthropology 101" for professionals who might not be familiar with the latest trends within the discipline. Apologies in advance — the account below is necessarily over-simplified and didactic; but I hope to show how current ethnography might help move us towards a more creative re-imagining of development itself.

observes — participant observation. As a participant, the ethnographer lives through the wide variety of inexplicit and unanticipated conditions entangled within any particular event and experiences phenomenon otherwise inaccessible to more structured, or secondary modes of research. Through the embodied experience of long-term participation, the ethnographer can trace a matrix of social relations that are not divided into disciplinary categories (e.g. economics, politics, psychology, etc.) and provide micro-analysis that is inherently holistic (the term “culture” provides a vague umbrella covering multiple facets of behavior, belief, presentation, power, etc.).

B) The micro-analysis of ethnography relies on a conceptual understanding that is necessarily comparative. The process of cultural interpretation involves not only a translation of languages, but also a translation of socio-

In this section I would like to introduce three monographs that illustrate current trends in Anthropology. I am choosing ethnographies that we've read in recent iterations of my Introduction to Anthropology course — not because my class is especially interesting, but in order to highlight the kind of ethnography that is taught in a contemporary college setting.

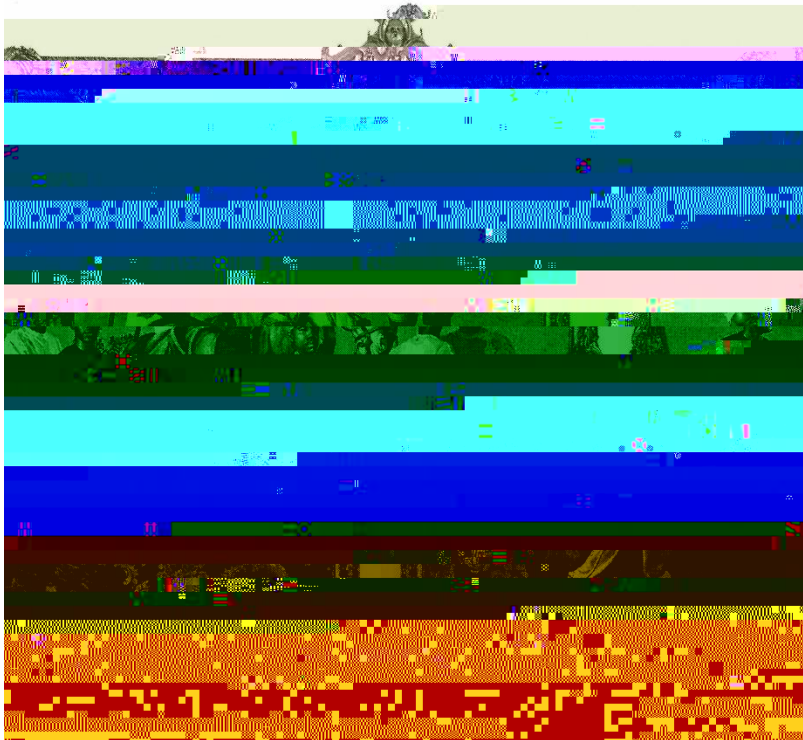
A) Radhika Govindrajan's *Animal Intimacies* (2018) deals with the relationships amongst humans and animals in the foothills of the Indian Himalaya. Methodologically, Govindrajan follows the classic model of long-term participant-observation — living, working and talking with villagers in their day-to-day life for a cumulative two-plus years. Nothing new here. On the other hand, Govindrajan uses her ethnographic experience to engage with cutting-edge discussions of queer and cyborg theory currently vibrant in US university circles (e.g. Sara Ahmed 2006; Donna Haraway 2016). Govindrajan brings voices from the Himalaya to bear on our own understandings of gender, sexuality, biological taxonomy, ethics and care. Her ethnography shows us how the comparative aspect of ethnography is not simply a one-way project of fitting empirical evidence to a pre-determined conceptual framework, but a dynamic process in which personal experience helps question, deconstruct, and re-form primary conceptions of reality. A cow, in her ethnography, is not simply a cow; and the women of Kumaon help us understand new relationships to animals and religion as well as hamburgers and sex. Her ethnography informs student understanding not only about India, but more fundamentally about their own assumed conceptions of reality.

B) Laurence Ralph's ethnography *Renegade Dreams* (2014) deals with violence, injury and recovery in a gangland neighborhood of Chicago. As with much of the world labeled the 'global south', 'impoverished' or 'underdeveloped', marginalized districts in American cities (often Black or other racio-ethnically designated neighborhoods) have been the subject of extensive scholarly and political attention. This attention invariably addresses urban crime and violence as a 'problem' to be solved by exogenous (mostly white) urban planners, social workers and police. Instead of accepting this tacit expert-driven discourse, Ralph listens to local residents who insist that local gangs are not the problem, but the primary agents through which development can take place. He presents local modes of coping with violence and injury as both legitimate and productive alternatives to more institutionalized narratives of 'neighborhood development' — projects that often silence, displace, and imprison precisely the community they purport to help. By taking local gangs seriously Ralph prioritizes ethical engagement with the interlocutors of his study, treating local residents as personal, political and intellectual equals, not scientific specimens. This allows for a level of collaboration otherwise impossible with more expert-driven modes of scholarship. Ralph is not exceptional

in this regard, and his monograph is a powerful reminder that scholarship does not take place in a political vacuum (cf. Lassiter 2005). Students learn that the socio-political inequality inherent to academic research carries ethical consequences prior to any supposedly scientific/objective results.

It's fitting in this regard that the painting that begins this book —

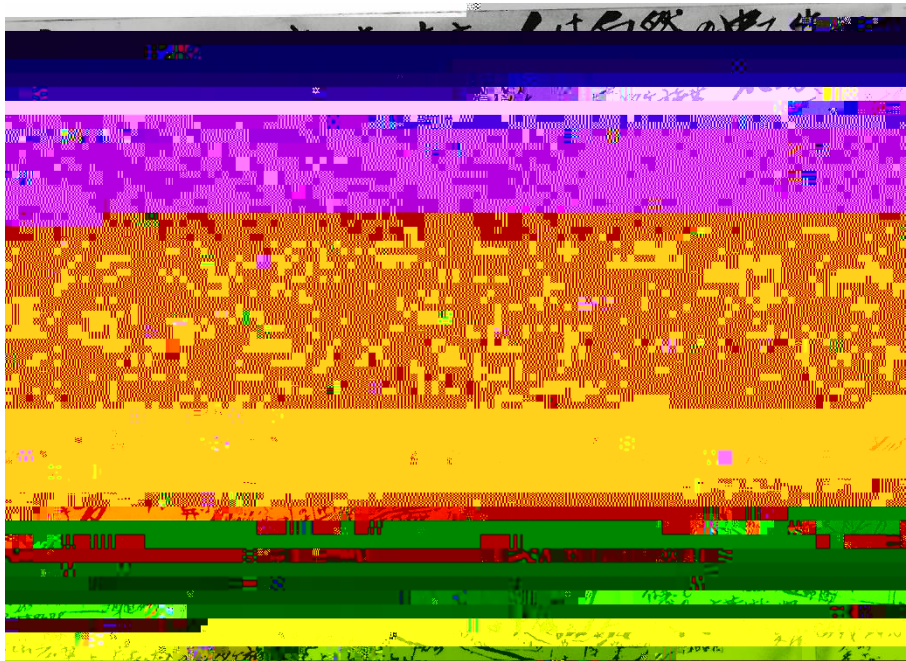
— accurately captures the spirit of what it means to have a renegade dream. Wiley's rendition blurs the boundaries between traditional and contemporary modes of representation. ...Why can't urban African Americans assume the delicate harmony and militant posture reminiscent of a Renaissance master? This book seeks to similarly restage urban blacks within societal institutions of fields of power from which they are often presumed to be excluded. (Ralph 2014)



C) A final example from Anna Tsing is more complicated, but also more directly relevant to international development. Tsing has made a career out of studying the systems of resource extraction enabled by multinational corporations, also known as “globalization” (Tsing, 1993; 2005); but her most recent monograph *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) extends this interest into more informal networks enabled by the global market in matsutake mushrooms. The book is wide-ranging, fragmented and unpredictable, much like

the dispersal of mushrooms in a forest. Accordingly, the primary contribution to emphasize here is the way in which Tsing helps us learn from the mushroom itself. This sounds wacky; but as the text moves through the woods of Oregon, Yunnan, Japan and back again we hear over and over of instances in which the mushroom thrives in scenes of capitalist failure and destruction (logged forests, obsolete lumber mills, unemployment). Similarly, humans marginalized by the same forces also manage to adapt and survive by paying close attention to the mushroom.

There is nothing planned, predictable, or structured about the proliferation and survival of these mushrooms and humans. Instead, the mushroom spores, the human pickers, and Tsing herself depend upon an ever-changing and serendipitous collaboration between soil, trees, climate and social conditions to eke out a living. Student response to this global multi-species ethnography is mixed; I suspect because most middle-class Americans do not fully appreciate the more devastating aspects of capitalist extraction and exploitation and still assume they will obtain stable jobs after receiving a prestigious undergraduate degree. However, as Anna Tsing argues, the classical model of investment, production, employment, and accumulation no longer works for much of the world's population, if it ever did. Anthropology, in this case, searches for alternative ways of preparing for a precarious future — a future that is less organized, less planned, and least expected, but nevertheless, all the more likely.



## Implications for Development?



precisely these types of political tensions. Ralph and others like him (De Leon 2015; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009) suggests that scholarship (or development) is not immune, divorced, or otherwise isolated from mundane political concerns. To ignore the political, economic, and ethical forces that form our conceptual frameworks is to tacitly subject ourselves to the very structures we are trying to change. These anthropologists encourage us to view development not simply as a technocratic skill linked to objective scientific truth (cf. Ferguson 2005), but on the contrary, as a deeply moral undertaking with ethical

as with ethnography, every development project is necessarily different, contextual and incomplete. I apologized in advance for using the model of teaching as the framework for this paper. Now it strikes me that teaching anthropology is a wonderful parallel to development — not because I am imparting knowledge to students, but because teaching is always a process of re-imagining, learning with, and coming to new understanding with my students. João Beihl and Peter Locke recently published an anthology entitled *Unfinished*. Many of the studies engage with severely marginalized individuals and communities, the kind of groups that are often subject to development projects. The over-arching theme of the volume (borrowed from Gilles Deleuze) is the idea of becoming, "... the subject is not a fixed entity, but an assemblage of multiple heterogeneous elements; not a given, but always under construction; not a product of an imagined interiority, but a folding and bending of outside forces. ... Subjects anticipate and invent—and anticipate because they invent—in concrete circumstances, navigating between things and relations" (Beihl and Locke, 2017, p. 42). We might think of this as 'radical ethnography' in that it urges us to approach research and knowledge in a way that looks towards what might be imagined, what may come to be, what is unknown; not what is already complete and understood. But this may not be so new after all; re-imagining may simply be the humility to stop imagining that we actually know what is going on!

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# Development, Disincentives, and Embedded Cultural Exchange in Rural Community Structures: A Case Study of Social Institutions

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The idea of what constitutes development and how it can best be achieved has repeatedly been subject of debates and conversations among scholars, development practitioners, and people in governments and non-governmental organizations alike. Rethinking and reimagining development has been continuous efforts among scholars and practitioners. In this paper, I would like to share what the discipline of anthropology, anthropological methodology, and ethnographic research can offer when considering such questions.

First, to broaden the discourse on what constitutes “development”, I would like to offer a glimpse into the Manangi community from Northern Nepal and its extensive diaspora in Southeast Asia. The kind of development they aspire for is rather different from what is generally conceived of in development practice. Over the course of a few decades, the Manangis rose from being one of the poorest communities in Nepal to becoming one of the wealthiest entrepreneurial communities. But in their view, wealth is not an indication of their success: It is what wealth enables them to do, or, rather, what they choose to do with their wealth that is an indication of development in their community.

The unfamiliarity of their ideas serves as a mirror for reflecting upon the more common Eurocentric conception of development. Not only is their ambition different, but the ways in which they go about achieving it may also be unrecognizable. This is because their practices are embedded in multiple social institutions that may be unfamiliar to development practitioners. But it is these social institutions, and the values that are created and reinforced





that rented a living space. From these gambling activities, the village kept 15% of each bet won, after which the fund was used for various social and religious projects. This gambling may thus be viewed as a way in which the community collected progressive income tax for communal undertakings as well as for circulating as loans in the community.

At an individual level, active participation in gambling brought prestige and social status. The higher the amount one bet, the more prestige the betting brought to the gambler, as the value of the bets was seen to reflect the actor's wealth as well as his willingness to part with that wealth, which signified his financial security and his readiness to take risks. In the Manangi community, being indifferent to the money lost in gambling was viewed positively, as was

vulnerable members of the community. These included building new monasteries and religious monuments in Nepal, a rest house in Bodhgaya, constructing roads and schools in Manang Valley, building a home for the elderly in Kathmandu, purchasing community ambulance, and running free health and dental camps.

We have thus seen how key social institutions in the Manangi community, namely rooming houses at trading sites abroad and obligatory social and religious gatherings at home in Kathmandu, encouraged socially desirable behaviors that enabled the Manangis to sustain and expand their trade abroad as well as fulfill social and spiritual purposes beyond their immediate material needs. Underlying these social behaviors were values that these social institutions sought to create and reinforce.

### **The cultural logic underlying partnership and internal cooperation**

All of us carry around in our head cultural ideas and assumptions that shape our thoughts and behaviors, whether or not we are aware of them. Stanley Tambiah, an anthropologist, referred to these cultural premises as a “cultural logic”—a framework of concepts—that



Even though the Manangis could, in principle, undertake the fasting ritual individually in their own homes, they chose to do it together. In fact, they formed partnership to support those enduring the fast by taking turns to “host”—by providing labor and money to organize and served at the event. Besides supporting one another to achieve spiritual goals that were challenging to pursue alone, the Manangis also sought to accrue religious merit together because it brought greater religious merit. This was reflected in the ways in which the Manangis gauged the religious merit accrued during the retreat.

Every evening of the fasting retreat, the Manangis added up the total number of beads that each person had counted individually. At the end of the eighteen-days-ceremony, they added up the number of beads counted throughout the retreat. This number was reported to the head monk, who announced it to the community, indicating the magnitude of religious merit accrued by the community as a whole. The counting of rosary beads at the fasting retreat was, therefore, not just an individual's pursuit of an individual's goal, for an individual's accomplishment—a higher rebirth. But it was also an indication of the extent to which the Manangis could support one another to accrue greater religious merit—a process which also brought merit to the enablers. It was thus a pursuit, at once, of both individual's and community's goal. It was a

collective accomplishment to which all participants and organizers had contributed, and to whom it belonged, regardless of their unequal contributions in terms of money, labor, or ability. According to this rationale, participation and contributions according to one's ability, even if unequal, created equal ownership of the outcome among the participating members. This logic of partnership, which shaped the Manangis' collective spiritual pursuit, mirrored the kind of partnership that underpinned their trade practices.

This leads me to the second story about how a group of Manangi gem traders collaborated to bring their gems out of Burma when an army took over the country in 1962. As told by a retired trader, many Manangis had shares in Burmese mining concessions at that time, but

into India, they had to cross a river, but there was a guard at the bridge. At the same time, the river was neck-deep, and they would have been swept by currents if they were to walk or swim across. Again, they brainstormed solutions, after which one of them figured out a way of crossing the river in a double line, with twenty-four people forming parallel lines and holding one another's hands, making it impossible for anyone to fall or get washed away. That was how they made it across to India while hiring Naga "smugglers" to carry their baskets across the border. From there, the Manangi trad



arrangements from another society out of context? Some of the questions that would be fruitful to think about include:

How can we develop a language or a methodology for recognizing institutional strength of a community?

Can we develop and test an index, a set of vocabulary, or a set of criteria that captures various attributes of societies that have well-functioning social institutions that facilitate and enable social members to achieve their aspirations?

What does it mean to have a strong local social institution? Does strong mean strict, absolute, undisputable, incontestable, and punitive, or is it the opposite?

These questions are meant to prompt some concrete discussions in development discourse as scholars and practitioners seek to reshape current development paradigm and give new directions to development practice.

## **Exploring a Language**

### **Institutional Creativity**

Elinor Ostrom, an economist and political scientist, who challenged the idea of the 'tragedy of the commons', for example, observed eight features that were present in communities that succeeded in managing common pool of resources without private ownership or government intervention. Their self-

Can the methodology and index be scaled up and down?

Exploring such indicators would certainly require looking at different societies in various contexts in multiple parts of the world, testing the limitation of such indicators and refining them. Moving between the specifics and the general is precisely what is needed for developing a new framework. I see this as one crucial area of new research in development. As a starting point for thinking more about parameters that capture and/or indicate institutional strength, I have listed some key attributes of the Manangi society that have enabled them to thrive. This list is in Appendix 2. What else could and should be in the index?

### ~~UNIT 2~~ **ended Cultural Exchange**

The idea of what constitutes development is far from being universal. People of different

communities can empower local communities to become aware of how their societies work, how they are moving forward, and how community members can have an influence on the future of their societies. With a better understanding of their own society, local communities, with support of development practitioners, can brainstorm an

free for all.

2. Rules are specific to each social and ecological context. No one-size-fits-all.

