
Book Reviews

Alex Schafran, Matthew Noah Smith and Stephen Hall 2020: *The Spatial Contract: A New Politics of Provision for an Urbanized Planet*. Manchester: Manchester University Press



The Spatial Contract is a book that delivers a concise message: if we work honestly together, we can take care of our basic human needs. It focuses our attention on the reliance systems of food, shelter, health, mobility and education, among others, which are essential for communities to act, have agency and be free. Central to this book is its analysis of the processes required for the development, maintenance and repair of these systems, based on healthy spatial contracts. The authors expose our inability to resolve basic population needs in places across the global South and global North, or predominantly on the left or the right. They challenge scholars and practitioners to address this task by providing thoughtful reflections, clear tools, and a path of possibility.

Three themes in the book stand out for their contribution to the field of urban and regional research and for the issues that unfold through their analysis: the material conditions of political processes, the specificity of knowledge, and the intersection of systems and settlements.

On the material conditions of political processes, the authors pursue Deb Cowen's inquiry: 'Could repairing infrastructure be a means of repairing political life more broadly?' (p. 4). Rather than starting with the ideological positions of political actors, Schafran *et al.* argue that a viable path to addressing the core purpose of shelter, for example, is to start with the provision of a house: a housing reliance system. Such a housing reliance system includes both a functional component (for resting, washing, cooking, eating, socializing, etc.) and a material component (roof, walls, water, gas, electricity, etc.), both of which change over time.

According to the authors, centering the discourse on housing can lead to a more productive politics and the actual resolution of shelter needs, rather than negotiating who has power a priori. For example, a common prelude to housing projects in California today is the intense power negotiations for leadership among Democratic and Republican leaders, the unions, environmental organizations, YIMBYs and NIMBYs, developers, and neighborhood organizations. These protracted power negotiations over each of the many agendas result in increased costs and time yet limited delivery of affordable housing. The authors provide an analytical framework for understanding the reliance system they propose and a set of principles to ensure a healthy spatial contract for its implementation, namely:

purpose, strength, access, exploitation elimination, planetary boundaries, and transparency (p. 46).

This is a productive path to follow at a time when there is a great deal of political polarization at the local, national and global level, including the polarization of our own intellectual production. Schafran *et al.* argue that housing needs to become more political, but on the basis of seeing housing as access to shelter, rather than on the basis of environmental, labor, or political parties' agendas. However, the basis for organizing politically or forming power coalitions around housing as a reliance system remains unclear. Would the political process require growth of the shrinking middle class or the political center? Would the call for transparency and honesty—a key principle of the healthy spatial contract—be the basis for political coalition? The proposed intellectual and analytical frameworks for reliance systems open up multiple questions for the requisite political framework that need further research.

Specificity of knowledge is the second key plank in the development and repair of reliance systems. The authors propose that knowledge should be centered on the purpose of the system and that the analysis of the system should address the users as well as the elements of production and natural resources. 'Housing that is empty but profitable is not housing. It is a reliance system realizing the capacity to produce wealth ... the production of a house must produce capacities for the new users of the home, not only the builder, the financier, the permitting officer or the landscaper' (p. 41).

Specificity of knowledge offers a critical contribution at a time when science is constantly being challenged and distortions of reality abound. It anchors the big intellectual questions and enables an organized interdisciplinary gathering of knowledge. The analytical framework for gathering specific knowledge about reliance systems also opens up questions about cultural and knowledge production. How can reliance systems address the cultural dimension? If cultural production is itself defined as a reliance system, what would the social and material conditions of this system be? Similarly, the production of knowledge for innovation beyond the formal educational system might require some attention in order to realize the abilities, agency and freedom of our communities.

As a third plank, the authors propose focusing on the intersection of reliance systems with settlements so as to recognize and move beyond the constraints of place-based politics. The development and repair of reliance systems should not be constrained by a municipal water service that excludes water sources, or by the urban-rural and formal-informal divides that create unnecessary and unproductive exclusions.

This focus on the intersection of reliance systems and settlements produces a set of questions which are pertinent to the current transformation of our cities, a transformation which has been fueled by rapid changes in technology and communications over recent decades and further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Office work, retail patterns, the distribution of goods and the location of services are shifting to virtual settings and new places. The authors provide the foundations for rethinking cities as a broad spectrum of settlements where reliance systems intersect. This is an effective framework for analyzing our changing spatial and mobility patterns at multiple scales, although it still requires further resolution

of the spatial contract in order to identify the population that is served, excluded or informed in the development of the reliance system.

Overall, the timing and clarity of this book are noteworthy. Particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reliance systems framework exposes the fragility of the health, housing, food, education and transportation systems, helping us analyze their collapse and explore opportunities to repair them. While the authors had little control over the timing of the pandemic, the book's clarity is definitely the result of much hard interdisciplinary labor. One can imagine their challenging deliberations over questions of sustainable infrastructure, political philosophy and regional planning perspectives as they built their analytical framework.

Scholars, practitioners and decision-makers working on the transformation of our human settlements will find this research compelling and refreshing. The authors' call for an honest engagement in producing effective solutions is built on substantial intellectual debates about society and space that unfold into clear analysis through a captivating narrative.

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