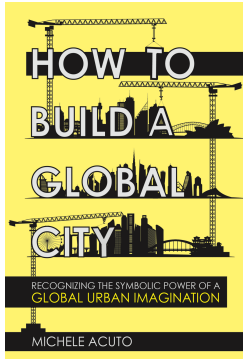


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# Book Reviews

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Michele Acuto 2021: *How to Build a Global City: Recognizing the Symbolic Power of a Global Urban Imagination*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press



Countless cities worldwide pursue surprisingly similar strategies of growth and internationalization against the backdrop of a vision to become global. This is the focus of *How to Build a Global City* by Michele Acuto. The author is right to point out that the term global city 'is a shorthand for a complex ... imagination that spurs not only a global sense of place but also its underlying debates about the desirability ... of cities becoming globalized. [Corresponding scholarly work is] continually translated in the tangible practices that politicians, developers, planners, and many others perform to quite literally build the urban hubs of our planet' (p. 7).

Acuto explores the imagination that drives the development of Dubai, Singapore and Sydney—the three cities he concentrates on. His analysis draws on 170 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with the elite involved in global city-making. These insights are joined together with the author's own observations and information from secondary sources. Chapter 1 paves the way for the analysis: those involved in consultancy and academic research on global cities contribute to 'global city-speak', creating a vision that wields substantial power over urban development. Chapter 2 provides an overview of research on global cities and chapter 3 summarizes its reception by critical scholars. Chapters 4 to 8 shed light on Dubai, Singapore and Sydney as nodes in global networks, long-term trajectories of urban planning, place branding, the role of important individuals, and the often messy formal governance of these cities.

In chapter 9, Acuto takes a closer look at strategies to position a city as global, pointing out that much emphasis is put on the creative class and a pleasant lifestyle. Chapter 10 addresses global cities as 'dual cities', built by and for a transnational elite. In chapter 11, the author argues that urban planning is shaped by the abundant rankings of cities, as municipal administrations seek to stay ahead of other cities or surpass them. He observes in chapter 12 that a handful of famous architects design the truly global zones of cities worldwide. The postscript criticizes scholarship that sustains global city-speak and calls for cosmopolitan, 'progressive' research.

*How to Build a Global City* is written in the style of an essayist. Each chapter begins with a story from the author's personal experience and he takes his reader along with him, providing impressions about the cities and events as if the reader were actually there. This is an impressive writing skill. Acuto then develops his argumentation against a backdrop of the conceptual literature and empirical evidence. It becomes clear that he is well-versed in the academic debates, able to summarize their key arguments and insights deftly, and also an expert on the past and

present of Dubai, Singapore and Sydney. His analysis reveals how much global city-makers refer to ideas and terms that have originated in academia. I do not know many colleagues who have been able to interact so closely with key decision-makers over so many years, gaining in-depth knowledge of what drives these people. Unfortunately, the crucial question of whether practitioners understand the academic ideas and terms correctly receives almost no attention.

In spite of its many merits, *How to Build a Global City* has some weaknesses. Paragraphs sometimes run across entire pages. And I find it concerning that Acuto works with qualitative interview data—mostly gathered through snowball sampling—and applies quantitative methods to analyse that data. In an ideal scenario, the qualitative data captures a wide spectrum of opinions on the issue under investigation. It provides detailed insights but can never be representative in the statistical sense. Hence, it is not suitable for quantitative, generalizing assessment.

Furthermore, the book contains some ideas that require more substantial debate. First, Acuto's critique of the literature that stands in the tradition of the Globalization and World Cities (GaWC) research network overshoots its target by claiming that the GaWC approach is 'academically (and in some cases ethically [!]) controversial' (p. 26). It is also misguided. Acuto is interested in the 'long-lived legacy that sits behind [global cities]' (p. 79). He seeks to understand cities as a whole. GaWC-inspired research pursues a different objective, analysing how the world economy is organized through the world city network. To achieve this objective, there is no need to delve into the many features of Dubai, Singapore and Sydney that Acuto so cunningly explains. What falls off the map is, indeed, usually irrelevant for command and control of the world economy.

Second, Acuto is dismissive of city rankings and the inter-city competition that they induce. Besides the fact that there is plenty of cooperation between global cities, I wonder whether competition is really always undesirable. There are, of course, plenty of examples of how efforts to become more global privilege the elite at the expense of the majority of the urban population. The shift in Richard Florida's work from *The Rise of the Creative Class*, published in 2002, to his more recent *The New Urban Crisis* best illustrates these dark sides. Still, I argue that inter-city competition may also push objectives that are worthy of being achieved. Acuto himself notes that Sydney strives to become 'one of the leading green cities in the race to address global warming' (p. 183). That is extremely positive, and even more so if other cities are incentivized to become better than Sydney. Johannesburg's global city vision includes erasing the faultlines inherited from apartheid. It seeks to be South Africa's most integrated city, which is also used as a place-branding slogan. While the effectiveness of the corresponding policies leaves much to be desired, the idea of performing better than others in this regard is not in and of itself bad.

Third, *How to Build a Global City* is based on the conviction that global cities are an elite project that works against the interests of the majority of the urban population. Yet the evidence to back up this claim in the book is thin, and as I have already indicated, efforts to become a global city are sometimes tied to initiatives for social inclusion. To give another example, the creative class agenda of Buenos Aires includes growth poles in the historically disconnected, poor south of the city (see <https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/desarrolloeconomico/subsecretaria-desarrolloeconomico/distritos-economicos>), comprising cultural events organized by ordinary citizens (see <https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/barrioscreativos>). The implementation

of the (in)famous Florida script here has led to the expansion of public transport and cycle paths. For sure, Buenos Aires suffers from socio-economic disparities and its branding strategy is not perfect, but it appears that the city has something to offer many of its inhabitants.

Such critique should not be (mis)understood as a rejection of the findings presented in *How to Build a Global City*. The book reminds us that academic concepts are often transformed into powerful policy scripts that do not necessarily reflect the intentions of the scholars who first drafted them. There is much potential for fruitful engagement with this book—not least from a perspective that is less critical than that of the author.

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