

A scenic walk through Brenner's *New Urban Spaces* in Toronto

Joanne Ong and Doctor Cary Wu
Department of Sociology, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3

Objective

We aim to develop a scenic approach to urban studies. In the spirit of “doing theory”, we capture ‘the urban condition’ by taking photographs of the city of Toronto, and we use these images to explain Brenner’s core concepts and arguments of “the urban” and, more generally, the process of “urbanization” in his recent monograph, *New Urban Spaces*.

Background

Before the global urban age, urbanization was viewed as a process by which rural spaces transform into urban spaces (Clark & Wu, 2019). This presupposes a “non-urban” realm outside the “urban” (Brenner, 2019).

In the global urban age, not only does “the urban” represent an increasingly worldwide condition, urbanism is found everywhere (Soja, 2019).

An alternative and more productive epistemology of the urban demands investigating the “urban restructuring” process (Brenner, 2019).

Methodology: Cities as scenes

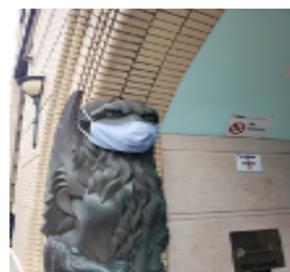
A scenic approach conceptualizes urbanization as a scenes-making process. Per Brenner’s conceptualization, we may no longer view the urban as an object in the form of the city but rather as a condition fraught with multiple dynamic forces that are in play and can only be understood in terms of abstractions.

Results



Urban categories

The urban and the rural are explained binarily, but this building with gardens on the balcony indicates how spaces are social, not “one thing among other things”, but... the fusion of connections (Brenner, 2019, p. 67). Therefore, there can be no “ahistorical settlement typologies (city, suburb, town, rural, countryside, wilderness)” (Brenner, 2019, p. 318).



Urban condition

Masks have become a norm, and this shows how urbanization is a planetary process of sociospatial agglomeration transforming “population, economic activity, social interaction, infrastructure, institutional organization” and “connectivity” (Brenner, 2019, p. 112).



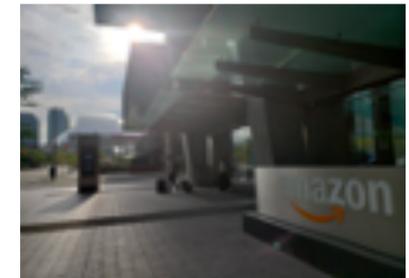
Fixity/motion contradiction

These different infrastructures show how the worldwide does not uproot the local (Brenner, 2019). The fixity/motion contradiction lies in the devaluation of urban built environments which become redone even as “no space disappears in the course of growth and development” (Brenner, 2019, p. 65).



Scale/rescaling

Scaling and rescaling (zoning projects) do not occur in ‘asocial’ demarcated areas, as space is the outcome of past strategies of “enclosure, dispossession, exploitation, and struggle” and their “traces” (Brenner, 2019, p. 73).



Global city Toronto

Amazon in Toronto demonstrates how cities become a “global mosaic of regions” with “the flow of spaces, global corporations, global financial movements and global politics” (Brenner, 2019, p.120).



Culture and capitalism

The city is just one expression of the “restlessly mutating” geographies of capitalist urbanization” (Brenner, 2019, 258). Chinatown is an example of how “new urban spaces made through global city formation” are foundationally the same as “new state spaces” being “locally punctured” as the state retains autonomy (Brenner, 2019, p. 136).

Conclusion

A scenic approach is a productive way to investigate how a street, nation and world may be urbanized because it stresses scenes-making, that is, the meaning of places and how such meanings impact the minds, hearts, appearance and biology of local people (Wu et al., 2020). In this way, the urban can be better understood as the multiplication of sociospatial relations changing and emerging beyond cities and “within and across contexts, territories, ecologies, and scales” instead of the urban as a fixed settlement (Brenner, 2019, p. 39).