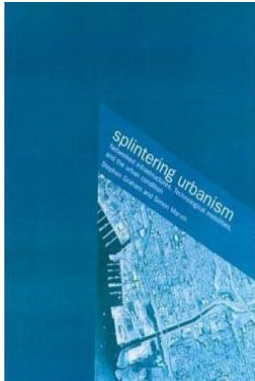


## 1. Essential reading



# Splintering Urbanism - by Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin

Infrastructures en réseau, mobilités technologiques et condition urbaine. Routledge, 2001, 478 pages

By Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)  
29 August 2013

Drawing on multiple examples of urban development across the world, *Splintering Urbanism* examines the role of urban infrastructure in fostering social and spatial inequality and identifies a new planning logic favouring the differential development of city spaces.

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## The high-modern ideal of the ubiquitously networked city

A distinctive aspect of western urbanism in the period of high modernism (1920-1960) was the attempt to create order and coherence through the standardized and ubiquitous development of water, power, transport and communication infrastructures across the geographies of the city. In a historical context characterized by a shift towards mass production (Fordism) and capitalist modernization (Keynesianism), networked infrastructures were regarded as public goods best delivered through public or private monopolies, highly symbolic elements in the formation of welfare states, and tools to reinvent the urban as a sanitized and functional place. As such, urban infrastructure became integral to the fabric of social, economic and political life in cities and, in the process, gradually relegated to the urban background, something taken for granted, out of sight, literally sunk under the city. But despite such apparent normalization of networked infrastructure in urban life and the normative aspirations towards the 'good' city held by planners and modernizers, infrastructure networks were never truly universal. Nonetheless, the high-modern ideal of an integrated, ubiquitously networked city still remained a defining element of the cultural construction of western cities.

## Emergent urban configurations: 'premium network spaces'

*Splintering Urbanism* documents the decline of this standardized integrated ideal and the rise of a new planning logic characterized by the differential development of urban and regional spaces. Central to this trend is the emergence of infrastructural projects delivering more reliable, higher quality services to powerful spaces and users which effectively enables them to withdraw from the public, standardized

monopolistic networks that have characterized urban areas during much of the twentieth century. Splintering Urbanism traces the emergence of such 'premium network spaces' in myriad cities across the world and highlights the need to understand this reconfiguration of infrastructural networks within wider processes of urban change and restructuring.

## **A new analytical prism: urban infrastructure, the technical and the social**

Understanding these complex and dynamic relationships in the age of globalization requires analytical prisms that allow us to see cities as evolving entities, embedded in a changing geometry of connections with proximate and distant places, channeling, storing, processing, and redistributing flows of energy, water, food, money and people. A focus on urban infrastructure, Graham and Marvin argue, provides such a dynamic way of seeing cities: 'When our analytical focus centres on how wires, ducts, tunnels, conduits, streets, highways, and technical networks that interlace and infuse cities are constructed and used, modern urbanism emerges as an extraordinarily complex and dynamic sociotechnical process' (p. 8). This perspective takes infrastructure networks as something other than just having 'impacts'. Borrowing from the tradition of Science and Technology Studies, Graham and Marvin conceive of infrastructure networks as a set of material objects and technologies inextricably entangled with social practices, meanings and values, seamlessly woven into the material, political and economic fabric of contemporary cities. Urban infrastructure is both technical and social.

Taking this perspective, Splintering Urbanism conceives of cities as sets of super-imposed and co-evolving infrastructural 'landscapes' playing a significant role in structuring experiences of urban culture and articulating in complex, dynamic and uneven ways different places, people and buildings across different geographies within and between cities. If urban infrastructures are part of and need to be understood within broader contexts, how then is the emergence of premium networked spaces related to wider changes in the politics and experiences of urban space?

## **The onset of splintered models of urban development**

Graham and Marvin identify a number of trends that have facilitated the emergence of premium networked spaces. Amongst these, they note the progressive liberalization and privatization of national infrastructure monopolies. Encouraged by global trade agreements, the opening up of monopolies to new forms of competition has attracted international finance capital seeking selective involvement in low-risk, high-profit individual projects concerning segments of infrastructure networks. Another important trend has been the loss of legitimacy of comprehensive urban planning following social and cultural critiques about the gendered, racial, and class biases of certain forms of knowledge and expertise, and the disastrous environmental legacy of large scale engineering works. The social movements emerging from May '68 or the collapse of the Soviet Union have been key moments in the shift from large scale infrastructural projects, driven by notions of the public good, towards a more pragmatic focus on selective interventions responding to more immediate economic and political constraints and demands. The result has been a growing differentiation of spaces and the, sometimes resigned, sometimes complacent, acceptance of the city as an archipelago of enclaves. In this context, rather than pursuing the implementation of an integral approach, urban planning is becoming more an attempt to coordinate different actors and agencies competing with each other for the best infrastructure to be developed in their own sector of the city or region. Another significant trend facilitating the emergence of premium networked spaces has been the diversification of consumer demand, the fragmentation of standardized mass consumption into niche markets in which goods attain high symbolic value as expressions of taste, status and identity. An expression of this is the diversification of infrastructural and service brands targeting internationalizing niche markets, especially those of high-spending customers. Finally, another key trend providing a fertile context for premium networked infrastructures has been the expansion of car-dependent sprawl which normalizes experiences of

urban and social fragmentation and segregation and increases the public's predisposition to accept or tolerate splintering infrastructure networks.

## **The city as an organizer of logistical processes**

As cities lose their spatial and functional coherence in a context of internationalizing markets and ever more complex spatial division of labour, certain sites specialized in the organization of logistical processes become strategic in securing a prominent position for the city on a global stage. These are sites organizing, managing and synchronizing the smooth, fast and precise shipment of goods and people: airports, seaports, train stations, export processing zones. These sites are full of life, pregnant with social, cultural and economic possibilities, emerging as cities within cities. While keeping the city connected to distant and politically, economically and culturally significant elsewhere, these places show a tendency to dissociate from immediate surroundings, reproducing a logic of selective disconnection within wider global processes of technical and economic integration.

## **Limits of premium networked infrastructures and possibilities for progressive splintered urbanism**

Graham and Marvin clarify that premium networked spaces do not necessarily succeed in seceding from the rest of the city. Such processes are highly contested by different actors, most notably social movements. Moreover, the ideal of a hermetically-sealed space of seclusion presumed by such projects rarely complies with the messy realities of everyday life with its uncontrolled and uncontrollable flows of people, substances, objects and information through what are always porous borders. Despite the bleak picture drawn throughout the book, in its final pages Graham and Marvin offer a more positive message and call for new urban imaginaries capable of inspiring more democratic urban politics.

## **Contribution to academic debates**

Splintering Urbanism is an influential and still widely discussed book in architecture and urban studies (receiving over 1,800 citations). Described as 'the first analytical geography of the network society' by the sociologist Manuel Castells, the book has inspired a wave of empirical research on inequality, mobility and urban infrastructure. A widely praised aspect of this book has been its global perspective that covers multiple case studies in all continents. Yet what is actually most remarkable about it is the authors' ability to synthesize, in an elegant and convincing way, such diverse and rich material. However, the book has also generated a lively controversy and some misplaced criticisms, despite the efforts made by the authors to qualify their argument and prevent certain misunderstandings. In particular, the splintering urbanism thesis has been criticized for overemphasizing the universality of the modern integral ideal, and overlooking numerous cases which contradict the prominence of processes of infrastructural secession ('unbundling') and exclusion ('bypassing'). Such criticisms have therefore questioned the global character of splintering urbanism, although this has done little to dilute the power of this important work. Among the authors who have creatively engaged with the splintering urbanism thesis, I particularly value the contribution made by Mimi Sheller (2009) in arguing that the restructuring processes described by Graham and Marvin are actually incorporating Caribbean islands into the spatial dynamics of 'advanced' metropolitan areas such as New York, while simultaneously disconnecting them from their local contexts.

## **About the authors**

**Stephen Graham** is professor of Cities and Society at the School of Architecture Planning and Landscape at the University of Newcastle. He has published extensively on cities, mobility, security and war.

**Simon Marvin** is professor of geography at Durham University. His research concerns urban infrastructure, resource use and climate change.

## References

- Castells, M. (1996) The Rise of the Network Society, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Sheller, M. (2009) "The new Caribbean complexity: mobility systems, tourism and spatial rescaling", Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, vol. 30 pp.189-203.

## Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Associated Thematics :

### Lifestyles

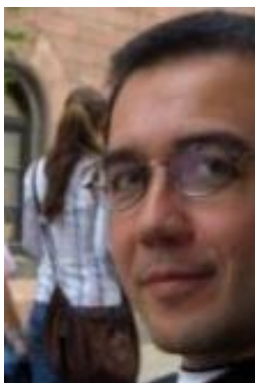
- Living environments
- Inequalities

### Policies

- Cities & Territories

### Theories

- Concepts



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Javier Caletrío is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology, Lancaster) . He is a researcher with a background in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, he also has a strong interest in the natural sciences, especially ecology and ornithology. His research lies broadly in the areas of environmental change and sustainability transitions, especially in relation to mobility and inequality. Javier was based at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University from 1998 to 2017.

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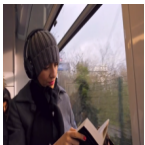
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