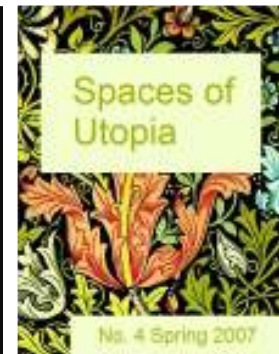


Cities as Spaces of Possibility: An Interview with Saskia Sassen

By Isabel Donas Botto



Citation: Saskia Sassen/ Isabel Donas Botto, "Cities as Spaces of Possibility: An Interview with Saskia Sassen", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 4, Spring 2007, pp. 1-10, <<http://ler.letras.up.pt> > ISSN 1646-4729.

Saskia Sassen has just moved to Columbia University after a decade as the Ralph Lewis Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago and Centennial Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics. She has written extensively on cities and globalisation. Amongst her publications are *The Global City* (Princeton, 1991, updated edition in 2001), *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, 2006) and *Deciphering the Global: Its Spaces, Scales and Subjects* (Routledge, 2007). She was invited to speak at the International Architecture Conference – “The Heart of the City” (May 31st - June 2nd), which took place in Lisbon, and where, of the 27 speakers, she was the only one who was not an architect. The Conference was one of the main events of the Lisbon Architecture Triennale 2007 (May 31st - July 31st), whose general theme is “Urban Voids”. Urban voids are defined by Spanish architect Ignasi de Solà Morales, quoted in *Vazios Urbanos/Urban Voids*, published to coincide with the Triennale, as “an area without clear limits, currently unused, hardly recognizable in the collective perception of citizens, usually forming a rupture in urban tissue. It is also an available area, full of expectations, strong in urban memory, with original potential: the space of possibility, of future”.

Q: In a recent interview you said that we are poised at the moment “where the future begins” (in “The Ideas Interview”, *Guardian*, July 4, 2006). I would like us to keep that in mind, as the present interview is to be published in an e-journal called *Spaces of Utopia*.

Let’s start with your views on the contemporary city. From the publication of *The Global City* in 1991, you have researched the process of globalisation and its impact on cities. You have demonstrated that global cities are strategic sites in the global economy and argue that they have become central nodes in the new service economy, with gains in importance and power comparable to

nation-states. What is the impact of this process on the urban geography of old historic cities like London or Paris – to keep to European examples?

A: In my work I try to show that there are global systems which implant themselves in a growing number of places. This brings great prosperity to some places and devastation to others. But even within the most prosperous places, it can devastate particular communities and spaces. Thus a city like New York has both the largest concentration of riches and the largest concentration of poor (over 20% of the city's population) in the whole of the US. To a lesser extent we can say this about London, and about Paris if we take the larger Paris region (including the *banlieues*).

This is, of course not a new story. But in each era it assumes specific forms. It is also a tricky story, because cities, both in Europe and in the USA, had become quite poor by the 1970s, when the real action was in building suburbs, in mass manufacturing, in mass consumption. Globalization re-energised these old cities. In the 1970s London and New York for example had gone bankrupt (as had Tokyo), something many people do not realise.

Returning to the theme of the Triennale, what is really being signalled by the "rehabilitation" of the centres of major European cities (and major cities everywhere in the world!) is a transformation rather than a voiding – a totally different way of occupying urban space. With the expanded centres, you might have even more people. Thus Chicago's city as a whole did not gain much population, if any, over the last decade, but if you just take the downtown, the "centre", 90,000 more people live there today than 10 or 15 years ago. Mostly the centres of cities have modest growth in population even as they grow in surface. Yet another meaning, one less literal, has to do with the transforming of what occupies the centre. If you are not ready to detect what replaces that which has left, then you get the sense of voiding. But one has to be careful. Many see only what has left, especially the big firms, commercial banks, insurance companies and corporate headquarters. What they fail to see is that these have often been replaced by many very small firms, small but "state of the art", and somewhat invisible until it becomes clear they are the new content of the centre.

Some cities are going precisely through this type of transition. So they look voided but actually there is a whole new economy taking shape and putting its roots in their centre. It can take time, and conflicts, to detect the new content, for narratives to emerge about its meaning. We saw that in NY and in London during their vast economic crisis of the 1970s and into the early 1980s. Both cities went bankrupt. People thought they were finished as significant economic hubs. It took a while for the new economic reality to become part of the experience of people. That's my understanding of "urban voids". I like it, in an ironic way, because it has multiple meanings, it's very dramatic.

There are powerful logics that explain why particular actors need the centres, and then eventually may need it less and new ones emerge in the vortex of change and innovation that again reinhabit the centre, and on and on, in a cycle of death and new life. I developed this argument in my global city model. I disagree with the notion – very strong in certain theories – that the centre no longer exists, because everybody has left to the suburbs and edge cities, or that the centre has become mere simulacrum.

Q: Your research has focused, as far as I know, mostly on the big city, the metropolis. What about the medium-sized town? What is its place in a global economy? Aren't these towns, as more ecologically balanced communities, viable urban forms of the future? Should government policy protect and encourage the preservation of this kind of town, where it exists?

A: I think these are partly empirical questions. We need to do the research to get to the answers. But, yes, we do want to make sure smaller places, towns, survive, and that their full richness and potential and history are alive and well.

Q: I believe you have lived in London, a city which stands out as one of the examples of the global city that you have been studying for some years. Bearing in mind the theme of the Lisbon Conference, "the heart of the city", how do you see this metropolis? Does London have a centre, a heart?

A: Allow me to speak about cityness, rather than a specific city such as London. London is a good lens through which to get at these questions.

A critical feature of the urban condition, both in the past and today is the presence of vast scales juxtaposed with interstitial spaces. Cities such as London are spaces of massive structures, massive markets, and massive capabilities. We might wonder what options such urban spaces give urban designers, planners, and architects to express their interests and ideas about the future, about what is about to happen and hence needs to be factored into design. The issue here is not so much the few either exceptional or lucky designers who gain a global stage in their particular field. My concern is rather a more diffuse urban landscape of opportunities for “making” in urban spaces dominated by massive structures and powerful actors. It is not design per se that concerns me here, but rather the larger political economy of design in cities which are part of these new global networked geographies: what is this landscape within which design today needs to function. There are, clearly, multiple ways of positing the challenges facing architecture and planning as practice and as theory. Admittedly, in emphasising the crucial place of cities for architecture, I construct a problematic that is not only positioned but also, perhaps inevitably, partial.

One consequence of the patterns described in the preceding answer is the ascendance, partly objective and perhaps mostly subjective, of process and flow over fixity and place. Growing velocities render a growing range of urban experiences as one more of flows than things, notwithstanding the vast amount of thingness around us. One of my concerns in researching globalization and digitisation is to recover the fixity and the materialities underlying much of the global and the digital and obscured by prevailing notions that everything is becoming flow. The globalising of activities and flows is in good part dependent on a vast network of places, mostly global cities. These types of sites contain many kinds of fixed (and mobile) resources. Things and materiality are critical for digitisation and globalisation; and places matter for global flows.

Returning to London, it is just one of a large number of major cities that evince these patterns and potentials.

Q: London witnessed only a few years ago some intense and highly publicised street demonstrations on the part of “The Country Alliance”. Do you think that the century-old debate on the opposition between country and city is a relevant debate today? Does it still make any sense given the gradual disappearance of frontiers between city and country as well as the impact of globalisation on urban geography?

A: There is much to be said about this, but let me just highlight an analytics that I think it captures something easily lost in the opposing of city and country.

A given geographic terrain can contain diverse spatialities. I think that much of what is still represented as the rural is increasingly occupied by novel spatialities, including non-rural ones. Thus in the UK, much of rural Britain, especially if not too far from London, is increasingly an extension of the urban economy, its markets, its demands. This new space economy that cuts across the rural-urban divide can exist along with some older, rural economies.

In some ways it is not new, but it is certainly much more prevalent than in the past.

Q: Again in Britain, there still seems to be a widespread interest in the concept of the garden-city. William Morris idealized a utopian future where “the town would be impregnated with the beauty of the country, and the country with the intelligence and the vivid life of the town”. The garden-city utopia, idealised by Ebenezer Howard, was an influential notion in twentieth-century urbanism and it has kept its appeal, not only in Britain, but also, I believe, in other countries, including the United States. In the age of the global city, do you think that this utopia, even if modified, will retain an impact? Could it be a viable instrument of change?

A: Well, confronted with the massiveness of today’s cities, vast infrastructures, vast corporate buildings, vast numbers of people, vast sprawl, the garden-city becomes finally a utopia. Most small towns and suburbs and exurbs were not that far away from the visual order (perhaps not the social order) of the garden-city.

Q: Suburbanisation is the other side of the coin of the desertification of the urban centre. Is this an irreversible process?

A: I like the juxtaposition of the voiding (desertification) of the urban centre and the growth of suburbanisation. I also think that it marks the preceding phase – the keynesian phase. As of the 1980s we see a whole new content and format for the urban centre. It emerges in the old grand cities – London, Paris, New York – out of the ashes of the destruction that suburbanisation meant for their earlier glories – your notion of desertification of the urban centre. But as of the 1980s we see a new phase. It is a mistake to think that suburbanisation is in play today as a factor shaping the character of the urban centre. The whole story of suburbanization which continues today with great vigour all around the world is really an older form. It is not the beginning of the future. The new, reinvented urban centre, brutal in its demands and power to impose itself on other claims, to summarily dismiss other claims on the centre, has no organisational relationship with the suburb, the way the old modern city did – what the suburb gained, the city lost. The future – the beginning of the future – is about another organi-city.

Q: In an interview last year (*Guardian*, July 4, 2006), you said that “we are becoming a planet of urban glamour zones and urban slums”. Can you elaborate on this?

A: This is the marker of the current tension and organicity – the urban glamour zone and the urban slum. It has replaced the older tension of suburb versus city. As we move to a majority of people living in urbanised areas, these are the emergent sharp formats. They are not the only ones – most people continue to live in medium-sized cities, in town, in suburbs. New formats are rarely the majority condition.

Q: The 20th century has given us plenty of images, in literature and in the cinema, of a future portrayed in dystopian cities. Given the current huge problems faced by big cities – poverty, crime, inner city desertification (coupled,

in historic city centres, with their museumification) and unceasing suburbanisation (a process that Murray Bookchin has referred to as “urban cannibalism”) – and the apparent incapacity of local governments to deal with it, the vision of the future that links the urban to the dystopian may prevail. Can we prevent this? Here I would refer to your earlier comment, that we are poised at the moment “where the future begins”.

A: Yes and no. Alfonso Cuarón, the Mexican director, made a (Hollywood) film, *Children of Men*, where he looks at London in 2027 – so it is not the science fiction of a faraway future, but quite close. It is a very dramatic account of the fear and hatred of the “other”, and how terribly destructive this fear and hatred of people can be for a city. It explodes the container of diversity that is a city, and it becomes a war zone. The urban is lost. Cuarón also made a parallel documentary, for which I was interviewed. There I say that Cuarón’s London of 2027 is the worst case scenario, but quite real. The good case scenario will take politics, because I am afraid that the “civic” is no longer enough. I do think that urban space, especially in large global cities, has become profoundly politicised. Politics is wired into urban space itself, it is not just a question of political actors and action.

See also the Tate’s exhibition of *Global Cities* – the urban glamour zone and the urban slum being its dominant images. It is, by the way, quite interesting that art is engaging the urban in such frontal and unmediated ways.

Q: I suppose another way of putting this last question would be to ask you whether you think utopia is still useful in our world, not as a blueprint for a model society but as project for the rebuilding or regeneration of urban space(s).

A: We are clearly living an age of dystopias, not utopias. Utopias look neat. Neat is not part of the currency of the present. Positing Utopia as a project is a genuinely utopian move. Somehow I think that the rebuilding you allude to is housed in the dominion of politics, not utopia. I mean the making of the political

– or the re-making of the political as we have known it. Now there is a utopian project!

Q: The theme of your panel, at the Lisbon Triennale, was the redefinition of urban centres, a subject viewed with great urgency at the present time. Does the success of cities depend on the recovery of their centres? Can this recovery be orchestrated without adopting the homogenising urban responses dictated by the global economy?

A: This is a complicated issue. In a way I answered at the beginning of the interview, in some of the earlier questions.

Q: What about urban voids – these places generated by processes of decay and physical and social degradation in city areas – that are the focus of the Triennale? Are they, as “expectant places”, spaces of hope? Do you think that they can, in any way, keep a utopian dimension, as places of intervention, for instance, as places where local inhabitants – citizens – can leave their mark, build a sense of place, strengthen their community ties?

A: Even as massive projects proliferate, these cities contain many under-used spaces, often characterised more by memory than current meaning. These spaces are part of the interiority of a city, yet lie outside of its organising utility-driven logics and spatial frames. They are the “terrains vagues” and urban voids that Ignacio Soli Morales wrote about and that has inspired this Triennial. These spaces allow many residents to connect to the rapidly transforming cities in which they live, and subjectively to bypass the massive infrastructures that have come to dominate more and more spaces in their cities.¹ Jumping at these terrains vagues in order to maximize real estate development would be a mistake from this perspective. Keeping some of this openness, might, further, make sense in terms of factoring future options at a time when utility logics change so quickly and often violently, excess of high rise office buildings being one of the great examples.

This opens up a salient dilemma about the current urban condition in ways that take it beyond the more transparent notions of high-tech architecture, virtual spaces, simulacra, theme parks. All of the latter matter, but they are fragments of an incomplete puzzle. There is a type of urban condition that dwells between the reality of massive structures and the reality of semi-abandoned places. I think it is central to the experience of the urban, and it makes legible transitions and unsettlements of specific spatio-temporal configurations.

The work of capturing this elusive quality that cities produce and make legible is not easily executed. Utility logics won't do. I can't help but think that artists are part of the answer – whether ephemeral public performances and installations or more lasting types of public sculpture, whether site-specific/community-based art, or nomadic sculptures that circulate among localities.

And so are architectural practices located in unforthcoming spaces. There is a diversity of such spaces. One instance is that of intersections of multiple transport and communication networks, where the naked eye or the engineer's understanding sees no shape, no possibility of a form, just pure infrastructure and its necessary uses. Another instance is a space that requires the work of detecting possible architectures where there now is merely a formal silence, a non-existence, such as a modest terrain vague, not a grand one that becomes magnificent through the scale of its decay, such as an old unused industrial harbor. In addition to all the other forms of work they represent, architecture and urban design can also function as critical artistic practices that allow us to capture something about this elusive urban quality – going far beyond what is represented by notions such as the theme-parking of the urban.

Q: I would like to end by asking you to comment on an interpretation of the place of utopia in the modern world as proposed by Françoise Choay: "Utopia, nowadays, is about recovering a sense of place".

A: Not sharp enough... recovering a sense of place can happen through many vectors, and is happening. You do not need utopia for that. As I said before,

utopia might be coming through the venue of remaking the political, a project where cities are a strategic space.

Saskia Sassen is moving to Columbia University to join the newly established Committee on Global Thought, after a decade at the University of Chicago. She is also a Centennial Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics. Her new book is *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press 2006). She has just completed for UNESCO a five-year project on sustainable human settlement for which she set up a network of researchers and activists in over 30 countries; it is published as one of the volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (Oxford, UK: EOLSS Publishers) [<http://www.eolss.net>].

Two of Saskia Sassen's most recent books have been translated into French, Spanish and Italian.

Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages:

Spanish: Buenos Aires Y Madrid : Ed. Katz 2007

Italian: Bruno Mondadori 2007

French: Paris: *Demopolis* 2007

A Sociology of Globalization (New York: Norton 2007):

Spanish: Buenos Aires Y Madrid, Ed. Katz, 2007

Italian: Einaudi, 2007

French: Paris, Gallimard 2007

Note

¹ For one of the best treatments of such "terrains vagues", see Ignasi Solá Morales, *Obra*, vol. 3 (Editorial Gigli, Barcelona, 2004). For an example of an intervention in one of these terrain vagues, in this case in the city of Buenos Aires, see Kermes Urbana, an organization which seeks to produce public space by reactivating such terrains vagues. (see at www.m7red.com.ar/m7-KUintro1.htm).