

### **What kind of a problem is a megacity?**

In her classic book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs asked the question: “what sort of problem is a city?” Her answer prefigured today’s theorizing on complex systems as she stressed that cities are characterized by organized complexity that is emergent rather than imposed. Good cities, in Jacobs’ view, are self-organizing cities. This argument has had a profound impact on the way we think about cities and the possibilities for planning. At least in some circles, Jacobs has become as hegemonic as modernism once was.

Since the publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* both complexity theory and cities have changed profoundly. Complexity theory has developed in a large interdisciplinary field of studies that provides a compelling framework to address pressing scholarly and social questions. At the same time, there is reason to be skeptical of viewing cities as “complex systems,” especially if this is taken to mean that planning is inherently problematic.

Cities have changed too. The world’s urban population has quadrupled since Jacobs published her book and the West is no longer the focal point of urbanization. The number of megacities has been growing rapidly and will continue to grow in the coming years, especially in Africa and Asia. These geographical shifts in urbanization raise the question whether ways of seeing and planning cities inspired by Jacobs should be abandoned or amended. Perhaps a megacity is a different kind of problem.

I address this issue through a reading of contemporary literature on cities and by means of my own research on Accra and Istanbul. I suggest that, indeed, megacities represent a different kind of problem. To understand them, we must not only look at their central areas, as Jacobs did, but especially at their peripheries. It is on the peripheries that cities expand and it is on the peripheries people develop new—sometimes destructive, sometimes inspiring—ways of living with each other and the environment.

See:

[Uitermark, Justus \(2015\) Longing for Wikitopia. The study and politics of self-organization, \*Urban Studies\* 52\(13\), 2301-2312.](#)

[Uitermark, Justus and Joris Tieleman \(2021\) From fragmentation to integration and back again: The politics of water infrastructure in Accra’s peripheral neighborhoods, \*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers\* 46: 347–362.](#)