

Urban Areas as Entangled Areas in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

In this engagement, I explore two ways to appreciate entangled areas in Southeast Asia through the urban, influenced by relational orientations to spatiality drawn from work in science and technology studies, assemblage urbanism and worlding cities. First, I survey how scholarship on Asian and Southeast Asian urbanisms have long reproduced but have also recently challenged the enduring territorial legacies of area thinking, moving from a view of stable, territorially-bound categories of space as basis for comparative analysis to one of movements, fluidity and interconnections. These shifts carry potentials for developing conceptual vectors oriented towards the coming together of socio-material contingencies that constitute urban areas. Second, I show how the periphery—a key spatial category that pertains to a specific urban site—may be examined as an effect of assemblage. A focus on emergence, contingency and undecidable trajectories destabilizes the fixity of spatial categories as basis for understanding urban areas. I demonstrate how an approach to entangled areas and their material itineraries highlights a multitude of practices, encounters, and co-existence that results in non-predetermined spatial outcomes. Such an approach to urban areas in/of Southeast Asia presents a different starting point for making areal comparisons while being more attuned to the multiple and generative possibilities in space.

Keywords

urban; area; entanglement; Southeast Asia; periphery

Unsettling Areas and Reconstituting the Urban

The resettlement site has emerged as a distinct feature of Manila's landscape in its peripheries. Often situated in marginal lands far from the city center where evicted relocatees used to live, these often inadequately provisioned sites stretch farther into rural landscapes ([Ortega 2020b](#); [Saguin and Alvarez 2022](#)). New villages of dense housing clusters of resettled urban dwellers are forced to coexist next to rice fields and agricultural lands, producing spaces where mobile urban-rural worlds appear to dissolve into each other.

The peripherality of the space of resettlement sites however is not quite fixed, stable or settled but are instead brought into being and continually transformed through various entanglements. Take the case of the urban garden, a common project intervention in many resettlement sites introduced to promote self-sufficiency amid infrastructural absences and to strengthen a sense of community and neighborly relations

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To cite this article Saguin, Kristian Karlo. 2025. "Urban Areas as Entangled Areas in Southeast Asia." *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 11(2): 99–108.
<https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2025.3065>.

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in a space where residents from various locations in the city have been forced to live together in a new environment. Yet spatial trajectories of resettlement gardens are open-ended and do not always align with what is expected or intended of this space. Gardens are spatially and temporally precarious. They are easy to set up but also equally to dismantle, replace or abandon, contributing to a sense of provisionality in space. They also reflect the place of such spaces in the urban imagination, often seen as temporary features bound to give way to other urban land use aspirations ([Saguin 2024](#)).

Maintaining a garden through time is an achievement of holding things together in place. For those who participate in the community gardens, various practices work to constantly bring together people, plants, materials, soils, knowledge, labor and aspirations to make these projects work and perform their function as areas of community in the resettlement sites. Gardeners encounter and modify the different soil conditions of land converted from previous agricultural use but now applying techniques suited to more intensive urban farming spaces, including use of organic pesticides, composts and other space-saving technologies. The more-than-human here are not passive, inert entities transformed but provide crucial relationalities in the production of gardening space. Experimenting with what works in a novel environment involves working with various human and more-than-human encounters with what are often considered as urban and rural worlds. The resettlement gardens are entangled areas where urban aspirations, technologies, land, resettlement infrastructural politics, and material struggles of making a living come together that juxtapose multiple, incongruent worlds. Beyond the structuring forces of urbanization, these peripheral areas are assembled through contingent socio-material practices and relations with a distributed agency.

These resettlement gardens as entangled peripheral areas point to the possibilities of reframing area through the urban. Areas and cities are enduring spatial categories that have been subject to constant reevaluation in light of shifting understandings of their dynamic nature. The spatial lexicons of the “urban” and “area” have largely developed in divergent directions as a result of differing disciplinary trajectories between area studies and urban studies. However, attempts to bridge and engage both sets of scholarship suggest fertile opportunities to consider their spatiality in novel terms. The urban becomes an arena for experiments in inhabiting by virtue of proximity, juxtaposition and co-existence of heterogeneous objects, lives, practices and worlds that present often unexpected openings and trajectories for revisiting area’s spatial coherence. Capturing these possibilities entails engagement with intellectual traditions such as those offered by science and technology studies and their orientation to the processes of becoming and the multiplicity of assemblages that compose urban worlds, where urban areas are considered entangled areas ([Blok and Farías 2016](#); [Jensen 2021a](#)).

In this engagement, I explore two ways to appreciate entangled areas in Southeast Asia through the urban, influenced by relational orientations to spatiality drawn from work in science and technology studies, assemblage urbanism, and worlding cities. First, I survey how scholarship on Asian and Southeast Asian urbanisms have long reproduced but have also recently challenged the enduring territorial legacies of area thinking, moving from a view of stable, territorially-bound categories of space as basis for comparative analysis to one of movements, fluidity and interconnections. These shifts carry potentials for developing

conceptual vectors oriented towards the coming together of socio-material contingencies that constitute urban areas. Second, I show how the periphery—a key spatial category that pertains to a specific urban site—may be examined as an effect of assemblage. A focus on emergence, contingency and undecidable trajectories destabilizes the fixity of spatial categories as basis for understanding urban areas. I demonstrate how an approach to entangled areas and their material itineraries highlights a multitude of practices, encounters, and co-existence that results in non-predetermined spatial outcomes. Such an approach to urban areas in/of Southeast Asia presents a different starting point for making areal comparisons while being more attuned to the multiple and generative possibilities in space.

The study of cities and areas have developed from largely separate spatial traditions and disciplinary contexts. The spaces of areas or regions, the subject of area studies, were held together by particular shared geographical traits and imaginaries rooted in Cold War geopolitics of knowledge production, which viewed space primarily as territories at the scale of the nation-state. Urban scholarship on the other hand has focused on the transformation of cities and their spaces over time. The comparative turn in urban studies has brought upon questions about how to compare cities and the grounds for such comparisons ([Robinson 2016](#)), methodological questions that have also long preoccupied area studies. The so-called third wave area studies challenged inherited spatial imaginaries and regional boundaries by emphasizing transnational connections and networks that constitute areas, moving from “trait geographies” to “process geographies” ([Sidaway et al. 2016](#)). This parallels similar turns in urban studies that reexamined the scales of cities ([Roy 2009](#)), rethinking localities in terms not only of their uniqueness but also their interdependence and interconnectedness with other places ([Massey 1993](#)) that may be multiscalar in nature, and not necessarily contiguous as in an area or region ([Shin 2021](#)).

Further interventions in urban studies also brought a reevaluation of the spaces of the urban. The postcolonial critique of urban theory initiated a turn toward southern cities as a way to dislocate urban theory and think through elsewhere, developing conceptual vectors linked with the area and geographical contexts from where they emerged ([Robinson 2016](#); [Roy 2009](#)). Areas and world-regions may thus serve as a heuristic device, where various urban questions are specifically addressed through area-based knowledge about the urban narrated from different world regions ([ibid.](#)), and as grounds from where knowledge production could start to understand shifting urban arrangements across diverse urban experiences ([The Urban Re-Arrangements Collective et al. 2023](#)).

We find a more explicit overlap in trajectories in the reimagining between area and urban studies in the concept of Asian urbanism. Asian urbanism emerged as a distinctive focus for urban studies amid talk of the “Asian century” and its future(s). Here, the question has been how to strike a balance between the particularities and uniqueness of cities that allows for comparisons or categorizations without reinforcing a stable notion of a region or essentializing the Asian city ([Ren and Luger 2015](#); [Rimmer and Dick in Padawangi 2019, 9-30](#)). As geographers Julie Ren and Jason Luger ([2015](#)) argued, the “Asian city” is not necessarily determined by common territorially-bound regional characteristics but is instead constituted by flows and circulation of ideas, imaginations, people, capital and things—i.e., socio-spatial processes and relations with their own historical conjunctures that are constantly remade through interconnectedness. These

constitute the spaces of the Asian city, which is mobile and travels around, appearing in multiple places within and beyond what the territorial boundaries of what we consider as Asia.

Perhaps the most significant reimagining of the Asian city was presented by the volume of urban scholar Ananya Roy and anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2011) on worlding cities. Explicitly situating their arguments away from dominant urban theoretical modes of global urbanism where cities are seen as sites of either capitalism or postcolonial urbanism, the volume sought to decouple territories and cities by emphasizing how these spaces are constantly remade by practices, ideas, actors and objects drawing on various connections and elements. These spatializing practices of making the city and solving urban problems are worlding projects that rearticulate and recontextualize the global while circulating to other places through acts of referencing ([ibid., 1-26](#)).

Worlding practices signal an orientation towards being widely open in their trajectories, without predetermined outcomes and predictable results. These practices reconfigure methods of how to examine cities, moving away from a view of structures to an analytic of assemblages. The stability of categories such as the city and their spaces are put into question rather than assumed as given, and these practices reimagine the urban as aspirational, experimental and speculative ([ibid.](#)). Roy ([ibid., 307-335](#)) expounds on the implications on “Asia” of the turn to worlding as a way of critically understanding global urbanisms. Worlding is both what is studied (as in the practices of experimenting) and a method of deconstruction and reconstruction, including of Asia as a referent. Roy ([ibid., 329](#)) suggests that worlding enables a turn away from seeing Asia as a location to the practices instead that make cities, such as the act of inter-referencing iterations of (Asian) cities, and various initiatives that produce spaces laterally and create shared connections.

Worlding practices resonate with a more radical view of reimagining the urban through a cosmopolitical lens that similarly challenges substantivist approaches to the city through STS approaches. Urban cosmopolitics focuses on how multiple assemblages co-exist, encounter, clash and accommodate multiple urban worlds ([Blok and Fariás 2016](#)). Such worlds—characterized by an articulation of both human and more-than-human co-presence—are thus always open-ended, with their politics oriented to the articulation of reassembling and recomposing these common worlds. The coexistence of multiple worlds provides grounds to articulate the urban condition and thus dynamically reconfigure the terrains of urban spatiality.

Reimagining Area through Southeast Asian Urbanisms

Beyond the broad idea of Asian urbanism, there are further opportunities to explore the area question as it engages with the distinct conceptual histories of urban thinking in Southeast Asia. The development of models of a Southeast Asian city and their reevaluations, for example, demonstrate how conceptual vectors emerge from a particular area focus. The increasing importance of cities in the urbanizing region created a different trajectory for area studies as it engaged with urban scholarship in the region. Cities as spatial entities were largely subsumed under the nation-state, which remained the key scale of regional analysis. Work on area studies approach to cities for example emerged with efforts to identify a distinctive Southeast



Asian city type, a subset of the Third World city characterized by dramatic post-independence urban changes rooted in colonial past ([Rimmer and Dick 2009](#)).

Urban geographer Terence McGee's (1967) work was one of the first to delineate a common spatial identity among cities in Southeast Asia that went against dominant models of cities derived from Western urban experience. He developed the concept of *desakota*—a portmanteau of the Indonesian words for village and city—as a key feature of Southeast Asian cities that challenged dominant Western urban theoretical dualisms of urban/rural, formal/informal and urban-rural transitions ([McGee 1991](#)). Based on observations of distinctive historical conditions of Southeast Asia, the urban-rural spatial model has been made applicable by urban scholars to characterize other land use patterns and contexts elsewhere in Asia and beyond ([Ortega 2020a](#)). The development of *desakota* as a spatial model came at a time when extended urbanization in many Southeast Asian cities increasingly encroached on the hinterland, creating a distinctive patchwork of rural and urban characteristics that described a complex spatiality different from how cities have been understood.

But influences of globalization and a view in urban studies of global interconnectedness and networks amid an integrated world have led to the reevaluation of the spaces of cities and the territorial integrity of the Southeast Asian city. Transcending the space of the nation, cities in Southeast Asia were then viewed as nodes in a global economic network and urban systems in their own right ([Rimmer and Dick in Padawangi 2019, 9–30](#)). Southeast Asia as a diverse and incoherent region that has relations beyond its porous borders, has become increasingly untenable as an area with coherent characteristics that can be delineated. Solid urban empirical and theoretical works in cities in Southeast Asia have shown urban areas beyond territorial spatial categories through diverse approaches to topics such as mobilities, transnational networks, environmental change, urban aspirations, and urban morphology (for example, [ibid.](#)).

Recent attempts to redefine areas in Southeast Asian cities, inspired by approaches that destabilize the rigid permanence of categories and concepts through an engagement with science and technology studies, assemblage urbanism and similar fields, view urban change as never predetermined and is instead a result of multiple contingent processes by various actors working to create unpredictable outcomes. Cities therefore emerge from the “lateral movements” and “sideways agency” of a constellation of actors—human and non-human—rather than from pre-given scalar structures of economics, politics or culture that produce urban space ([2021b](#)). Anthropologist Casper Bruun Jensen ([2021a](#)) takes the possibilities opened up by the worlding approach to Asian cities alongside cultural studies scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen's “Asia as method” ([2010](#)) intervention to explore the mobile materiality of urban worlds. Focusing on material itineraries as descriptors of urban change, cities are seen as “a continuous designing event,” emerging through processes of becoming, without clear certainty in their composition as multiple assemblages. Socio-material flows constitute these itineraries, which do the work of worlding, which when stabilized contribute to the grounds upon which cities become. The result is an assemblage or contingent effects. Tracing such material itineraries and how they emerge enables a view of Southeast Asian cities as a method of inquiry rather than an inherited spatial category that comes with its own spatial features and assumptions.

Both worlding and material itineraries approaches present a divergent path to the area question in Southeast Asia both rooted in urban thinking and seeking to transcend the morphological and territorial constraints of previous works at the intersection of area and urban studies. By considering Southeast Asia as a heuristic device ([Roy 2009](#)) and a method of inquiry ([Jensen 2021a](#)), area then emerges as grounds from where we understand the spatial processes of becoming, emphasizing the socio-material gathering together of a constellation of actors that stabilize urban space and trajectories. These approaches unsettle Southeast Asia as fixed space, an idea that has methodologically and conceptually constrained comparisons of cities within and across regions.

Urban Peripheries as Entangled Areas

The periphery is one specific example of an urban spatial category that may be differently framed through STS-influenced approaches to worlding and cosmopolitics. The idea of the periphery carries a hefty conceptual baggage, often viewed in relation to a center or core, and has been associated with particular shifting geographic and spatial characteristics, categories and relations of marginality ([Follmann 2022](#); [Pieterse 2019](#); [Saguin 2022](#)). Yet, the spatial vocabulary that guides analysis of peripheries, especially in relation to cross- and intra-regional comparisons, have been limited to scholarly appraisals of their common forms and functions.

Conceptualizing peripheries has particular resonance for Southeast Asia, an area that has become a site from where geographies of urban thinking about such spaces have been long revisited. In Southeast Asian cities, peripheries are particularly characterized by juxtapositions and contiguities of a variety of built environments—agricultural lands, new economic zones, suburban towns, resettlement and informal settlements—as well as processes that conflict with each other given their dense proximity, resulting in a dynamic sense of undecidability ([Simone in Padawangi 2019, 64–74](#)).

Research on urban Southeast Asian peripheries has thus become a fertile ground to contribute area-based urban conceptual vectors. The *desakota* concept introduced earlier is a notable example of a model formulated to define a spatial form of cities in Southeast Asia that attempts to produce a distinct and empirically-engaged narrative about peripheries that may be viewed relationally through various worlding practices ([Ortega 2020a](#)). Semi-urbanism, a concept developed through the urban experience of Indonesian urbanization, similarly attempts to view *kampung*s in the city as distinctive peripheral, in-between spaces that articulate with the formal city ([Kusno in Padawangi 2019, 75–89](#)). Processes of extended ruralization are also significant forces in the production of hybrid rural-urban spaces in many of Southeast Asia's cities ([Gillen et al. 2022](#)). Meanwhile, concepts like “edges” and “edginess” have also been deployed to describe the particular conditions, relations and ethos in these in-between spaces in cities such as Hanoi and Manila ([Harms 2011](#); [Saguin 2022](#)).

As a process, peripheries present a way of troubling and disrupting the notion of a stable and identifiable urban zone at the edge of the urban/rural ([Pieterse 2019](#)). The diverse processes that coexist, entangle and assemble in these dynamic, fluid areas produce heterogeneous landscapes and configurations ([Caldeira 2017](#)). Such a view decouples peripheries from territory and location, and emphasizes the process of

becoming peripheral, and resists the idea of peripheries as mere zones of conflict and transition that are expected to develop similar to the city. Peripheries as urban extensions also illustrate the process of drawing out the urban to reach new forms of connections and enable new orientations in people's attempts to make urban life viable ([Simone et al. 2025](#)).

A distinct relational approach that brings attention to their becoming and how peripheries emerge and are stabilized could help make sense of their heterogeneity and dynamic becoming, and therefore present generative points of comparison and connection. The diversity of objects, actors, relations and events that are juxtaposed or made contiguous within peripheral areas result in outcomes that are undecidable and unpredictable and not necessarily known beforehand ([Simone 2018](#)). They speak to the urban cosmopolitical challenge of making sense of the co-presence of multiple assemblages that create urban worlds, which begins with plural trajectories producing possible spatial becomings ([Blok and Farías 2016](#)).

Peripheries may thus be viewed as effects of assemblages, as particular entangled areas achieved through the work of various human and more-than-human practices. These assemblages of diverse socio-material flows and movements co-exist but are also composed of people's rhythms of movement and desires in designing a world where they could situate themselves ([Simone 2018](#)). Practices and improvisations change material itineraries and configurations as multiple worlds are encountered, with distributed agency ([Jensen 2021b](#)). Multiple interests and socio-material flows and events coincide here to keep possibilities open for urban life through their rearrangements and maintenance by urban residents ([The Urban Re-Arrangements Collective et al. 2023](#)). Peripheries as entangled areas provides a parallel approach to lateral comparisons that goes beyond territorial underpinnings of Southeast Asia, focusing instead on emerging entanglements in the production of area. Beyond peripheries as spatial containers of where events unfold, areas are the unpredictable outcomes of contingent socio-material processes that may take various spatial and scalar forms ([Jensen 2021b](#)).

The example of the urban garden in resettlement sites illustrates the possibilities of peripheries as entangled areas. These resettlement gardens can be mapped in terms of their location in the urban periphery, as pockets of land in the fringes that cultivate a sense of habitability in a harsh zone. However, they may also be understood as effects of the assemblage of multiple entangled practices, materials, aspirations and movements contributing to their becoming and maintenance as peripheral areas.

The implications for considering area as a spatial category within and beyond Southeast Asia include providing a different starting point to view urban areas—whether for urban comparison across the region or in the constitution of a specific urban site—that begin with relational entanglements rather than a given, fixed space. Making space for gardens creates a perspective of peripheral areas that add to relational understanding of dynamic urban space that prioritize unexpected trajectories and open-ended possibilities resulting from many forms of agency within these many entanglements.

Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from STS approaches, this engagement sought to reframe area beyond its rendering as a fixed, stable or inert spatial category. It did so by exploring two intersections between area and the urban: by tracing the conceptual shifts in area thinking through the urban in Southeast Asia and by highlighting periphery as an effect of the assemblage of multiple entanglements. The example of resettlement urban gardens in Manila presented a provisional illustration of the empirical approach to entangled areas attuned to processes of becoming and the multiple, undecidable trajectories of the urban that results from socio-material contingencies in space. For urban and area scholars in and of Southeast Asia, viewing the continuous becoming of such spaces may present a way to develop conceptual vectors that capture the generative possibilities of multiplicity and heterogeneity in urban areas.

Author Biography

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