

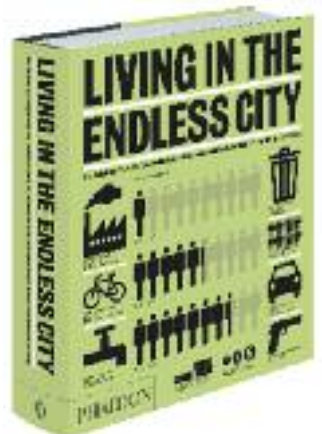


Books

Going south

Living in the Endless City
eds Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic
Phaidon Press, 432pp, £40

The Urban Age project's pop analysis of the megacities of the global South lacks both critical rigour and local input, finds Pushpa Arabindoo.



In 2007, an attractively titled publication, *The Endless City*, was released by the Urban Age project of the London School of Economics and Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society. Its paradigmatic comparison of six cities from the global North (London, New York, Berlin) and South (Mexico City, Johannesburg and Shanghai) aimed to generate important conceptual and practical questions that would rethink basic notions of (future) urbanity. More than anything, however, *The Endless City* demonstrated how to pop-analyse cities in three easy steps.

Step 1: Ensure a dream line-up of contributors that would turn any editor green with envy. Never mind that only a handful of them will respond to your brief, with quite a few recycling their arguments. If you are in luck, it might be styled differently, but be prepared for a sense of déjà vu.

Step 2: Fill the pages with glossy full-bleed images, preferably aerial shots and seductively drawn maps. It is not necessary that they should be legible. If you are not sure, check Rem Koolhaas' Harvard Project on the City publications where this art has been more or less perfected.

Step 3: Sprinkle shock-and-awe statistics and fact-figures amongst the text. They might be open to interpretation and might not be accurate but it is even better if they spill over into the dust jacket to grab the attention of potential readers. The old adage of not judging a book by its cover does not apply here.

This formula is pretty much adhered to in the lime-green sequel to the popular orange compendium with an equally compelling title – *Living in the Endless City*. Where the first volume criss-crossed six cities over a dizzying 500-odd pages, the second is considerably more restrained, limiting itself to three

cities – Mumbai, São Paulo and Istanbul. Beginning with a safe disclaimer that this is not an academic exercise, it follows the recent trend of producing chic studies of cities in the global South. This is not necessarily a problem but can prove to be one when there is a conscious lack of critical analysis applied to the cities in question. As a result, 'Cities', written by local experts, proves to be the weakest section, not just because of the considerable overlap between the different chapters and repetitions that could have been easily edited out, but also due to the **Above, below** *Views of Mumbai and São Paulo from Living in the Endless City.*



rather lazily drawn generalised summaries of key challenges such as governance, infrastructure, and the important characteristic of cosmopolitanism. In contrast, 'Reflections' constitutes perhaps the best part of the book, where contributors have gone to the effort of weaving together the three cities in a comparative focus on pertinent common issues including transport, local democratic institutions, faith and (dis)order in the city, and informality.

Nevertheless, in a book that is about 'living' in the endless city, I was expecting to hear the voices of those who inhabit these cities, particularly, their everyday struggles and actions. Instead, this privilege is given to the sophisticated discourse of elite intellectuals whose expert knowledge dominates these pages. As David Satterthwaite poignantly reminds us, few of those who read this text will have their homes bulldozed or live in a house that has no piped water supply or sink, no



provision for a toilet, no waste collection service – or have had to spend years negotiating with local government or local utilities suppliers to address these issues.

Unfortunately, these ordinary voices are reduced to a MORI-style

'end-user' survey, an omission that is rectified to a certain extent by Adam Kaasa's rushed end-piece accommodating a few pages in tribute to their resistance. This, in my opinion, is the greatest failing of the book.

Above Aerial view of Istanbul, from *Living in the Endless City*.

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