

Asymmetric Cities

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Abstract

If current trends continue the cities of 2050 will be more still more asymmetrical. In this lecture I will present some examples of attempts at alleviating asymmetries in urban life in the research and success stories of the British Academy's Cities and Infrastructure Programme. The seventeen research projects comprising this programme involve interdisciplinary research in poor and popular neighbourhoods in some of the world's fastest growing cities in the global south. I will also present some of my own research into the impact on cities of extreme concentrations of wealth. Plutocratic cities, shaped in the everyday ecologies of wealthy life, and lived by the masses, are profoundly asymmetrical. Extreme accumulations of wealth not seen in a century now shape London and other cities too. Asia produces more new millionaires than any other region. Cities like London are an unfolding experiment in the consequences of the coexistence of want and wealth. This makes research into the substance of wealth and the mechanisms creating it in the fortunes, lives and habitats of plutocrats an urgent priority. Drawing on my research on London's plutocrats, this lecture presents two street view vignettes. One is drawn from the city's financial machine. The other explores the domestic investments of wealth in a London neighbourhood. From these street views I argue that there are intellectual and political benefits in understanding cities through close encounters with the infrastructures of wealth generation and consumption.