

Uncertain future: the bigger picture

[Sociology](#), [Community](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Nature as an inspiration](#) \n \t
2. [The Human Psyche](#) \n \t
3. [Space and Uncertainty](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

There exists a political imperative to plan for uncertainty, however who to plan for and to what effects often remains a point of debate. Uncertain futures with regard to economic crisis, natural disasters, infrastructural breakdown and conflicts force us to shift the way we perceive, plan and govern cities. In cases of unexpected events, the interaction between formal institutions and affected communities becomes paramount to observe. A methodologically and theoretically challenging concept, research on uncertainty is fragmented between spatial planning, anthropology, geography, politics and social sciences and thus calls for an interdisciplinary engagement to understand how to cope with instances of disruption, speculation and insecurity which manifests in multiple scales.

Nasim Nicolas Taleb's polemical work on uncertainty, randomness, volatility and probability has been devoted to showcasing that it is highly improbable to measure the likelihood of rare, world changing events which he has referred to as 'Black Swan'. The near catastrophic and negative instances of black swan events include the financial crisis to the tsunami that struck the Fukushima nuclear reactor in 2011. Positive black swan events include the internet and meteoric rise of Google. Perhaps this sporadic nature of its

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occurrence calls for a new approach wherein instead of trying the onerous task of predicting unexpected events and failing, these events and the uncertainty of their occurrence could be seen as an opportunity and as an improvement where the future can thrive on uncertainty. While Taleb mainly used his concept of anti-fragility and the method of ‘non-predictive decision making’ primarily to predict Black Swan events in the financial sector; for maximizing pay-offs and asset management; it can be highly useful to understand the benefits of a flexible approach to contingency planning issues. As opined by Thomas Friedmann, the present day business world has witnessed the success of disruptive business models. Communication platforms continue to revolutionize a range of industries. To give examples, the biggest taxi company in the world, Uber does not own cars. Facebook does not create the media shared on its platform and the success of Airbnb depends on the range of real estate that it does not own. These businesses along with many others use the acronym VUCA or volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity to define the new order. As economist Noreena Hertz puts it, one of today’s fundamental challenges is coping with disorder.

Nature as an inspiration

Nature and its inherent organic systems are an example of ongoing evolution and adaptation to uncertainty. Susceptibility to error, risk and failure strengthens the endurance of the system. However, rather than a binary distinction between natural and man-made things; most man-made things like ideas, technologies, businesses and economy are influenced and operated by organic principles.

The Human Psyche

Psychologists have also encouraged the idea of embracing uncertainty. At a young age, when children are exposed to unusual and radical experiences, it shapes their view of the world. Psychologist Dean Simonton has used the term ‘diversifying experiences’ to describe the effect of collision of beliefs with unexpected and unclear situations. This also strengthens our threshold towards ambiguous situations and our capacity to learn from ambiguity. While rational and logical thinking requires focus, it might also result in certain form of rigidity generated by conventional and narrow ideas. New paradigms which are able to challenge conventional wisdom and thought emerge from flexible thinking. However when confronted by the realities and uncertainties caused by climate change, people are not necessarily motivated to change their behavior nor are their entrenched views influenced by the facts illustrated by graphs, datasets and arguments. Does this mean that we talk about layers of uncertainty in ways that are ineffective and not compelling enough to alternate behavior?

Space and Uncertainty

How does uncertainty interact with and shape urban life? What kind of strategies and tactics are employed by individuals and groups to find stability in uncertain times? What kind of socio-political outcomes does unexpected events result in?

Understanding the effect of uncertainty on the urban condition requires a way of thinking of the city not as static and bounded but as a distributed network of flows and interdependencies and socio – political relations.

Uncertainty also manifests in various forms in different settings and therefore its implications on urban governance also varies. This requires observing aspects of urban life that are not explicit or anticipated. Role of the actors that are not part of the state mechanism such as social media networks, paramilitary armies, also reconfigures and challenges established norms of dealing with uncertainty.

Is addressing uncertainty perhaps a way of overcoming the rhetorical narrative of loss and distress to redirect our practical and theoretical energies towards using it as an opportunity instead? There are also instances where marginalized processes occupied accidental center stage. The research on uncertainty also demands a way of thinking beyond and outside bureaucratic and traditional frames, to address a number of emerging phenomena of daily, recurring processes outside the constraints of organized public space and overlaps in time, space and users.

What kind of spaces can serve as catalysts for experimentation for urban labs? Observing transitions of everyday urban life which clarifies the energy and texture coursing through the cities. When seen through the lens of uncertainty, it becomes clear that urbanity itself is a space of uncertainty. How did the minutiae of marginalized activities overrule institutional setup and gain identity in dealing with the unexpected events? How can we navigate through the urban complexity to conceptualize and situate uncertainty? A multiplicity of immediate responses, partly emerging from cultural norms of organic assistance. Existing and proposed master plans and zoning plans seek to reinforce certainty as a desirable key driver in

outcomes and development of the urban area and built environment. They leave little room for speculation or unexpected events, and often do not take into account subjective experiences of actors. This stands in anathema to the increasing occurrence of uncertainty in events around the world and therefore forces us to rethink 'the praxis of strategic spatial planning' and move away from the 'straitjacket of despatialized policy criteria' which is the planning norm for many countries. Kerala as the focus. 'Essentialist approach' in opposition to relational approach.

Political, legal and administrative inconsistency in production of plans. The trajectory of spatial development. Dream of single family home ownership. Progress equals building frenzy. Influenced by the mid-20th century 'plane of reference for planning became increasingly technocratic, dependent on standards and zoning schemes'. Albrechts and Balducci (2013: 11) elucidates that a critical aspect of a strategic plan is that it 'works with uncertainty', working 'within the context of uncertainty... to enable the actors to open up the spectrum of possibilities'. When the plans are dissected with respect to Wayanad, the tendency veers towards certainty rather than embracing and valuing uncertainty. Until cities metamorphosed, life was considered to be simpler. Cities were complex, chaotic and unpredictable compared to the countryside. Planners, architects and urbanists have strived to bring semblance and order to the complexity through futuristic plans and strategies, often more statutory than visionary. Cities in the global south are a striking example of complexity, chaos and inconsistency. On the outset, it may seem that these dynamics are often not observed in the global north, however dichotomies such as first and third

world, urban and rural, modernity and development, megacities and global cities stand to be subverted when discussing urban conditions under situations of uncertainty. It is also important to note that uncertainty is not a synonym for poverty of informality. Lack of a shared vision of how to describe the modern urban condition and the uncertainty that accompanies it. Where there is no concrete evidence of the future, tentative experiments are employed. And part of the reason why concepts like ‘preparedness’, ‘resilience’ and ‘sustainability’ are used to describe turbulence in the urban condition (Amin, 2013) How do people respond to persisting uncertainty? Often we come up with various ways to impose order and make sense of the incomprehensible.