



# Urban Geography

4th edition

Tim Hall and Heather Barrett

# **Urban Geography**

## **4th edition**

This extensively revised and updated fourth edition not only examines the new geographical patterns forming within and between cities, but also investigates the way geographers have sought to make sense of this urban transformation. It is structured into three sections: ‘contexts’, ‘themes’ and ‘issues’ that move students from a foundation in urban geography through its major themes to contemporary and pressing issues. The text critically synthesizes key literatures in the following areas:

- an urban world
- changing approaches to urban geography
- urban form and structure
- economy and the city
- urban politics
- planning, regeneration and urban policy
- cities and culture
- architecture and urban landscapes
- images of the city
- experiencing the city
- housing and residential segregation
- transport and mobility in cities
- sustainability and the city.

The fourth edition combines the topicality and accessibility of previous editions with extensive new material, including many new chapters such as an urban world and politics, housing and residential segregation, and transport in cities, as well as a wealth of international case studies, extending its range of coverage across the field. This book features enhanced pedagogy including a range of new illustrations and tables, a list of key ideas for each chapter, end of chapter essay questions and project activities, and annotated further reading from books, journals and websites. Written in an engaging, student-friendly style, this is an essential read for students and scholars of urban geography.

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# **Section 1**

## **Contexts**

# 1

# An urban world

## Five key ideas

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- We live in an increasingly urban world which is dynamic and changing and characterized by great diversity.
- We have all experienced ‘the urban’ in some way and this personal experience forms an important foundation from which to research and theorize about cities.
- At the macro scale, patterns of global urbanization are changing, with significant urban growth in parts of the Global South with previously low urban populations.
- Cities are increasingly economically, politically and culturally connected and occupy particular niches within increasingly competitive global urban networks.
- City life offers both opportunities and problems. Concerns about the problems and inequalities of large cities and rapid urban growth have existed from the nineteenth century onwards, often eloquently expressed in fictional writings about cities.

## Introduction

---

We live in an urban world, or more accurately many different urban worlds. In July 2007, for the first time in human history, the majority of the world’s population resided in cities. This event, hailed as monumental in much media coverage, was, in itself, of little more than symbolic importance. The trends, most notably massive urban growth in the Global South, had been apparent for some time and show no sign of slowing down, let alone reversing. It is against this background, a growing, dynamic urban world characterized by increasing interconnection and inequality that faces challenges in the near future including peak oil and probable climate chaos, that this book invites you into the world of urban geography. Urban geography texts always argue

that their publication coincides with exciting and challenging times for the city. They are always correct. Whatever cities might be they are never boring.

The dynamic and diverse nature of the urban world presents a significant challenge for those attempting to write a textbook to guide students through its complexities. For a general textbook, the aim should be to provide the student with as comprehensive an overview as possible. However this is always only ever partially fulfilled. Textbooks, such as this one, are written by authors who approach the study of the city in particular ways, drawing on their own set of knowledge and experiences. Who writes the book and where they are based matters. This has been a key issue raised about urban geographical writing on the city, where it has been pointed out that in reality universal ideas and theories about the city are only ever partial (see for example Robinson 2005a).

It is therefore an important starting point for researchers and writers to acknowledge and understand their own perspective and position in any piece of work. We are two urban geographers who were born and brought up in the United Kingdom (UK) and who have worked mainly in UK universities. Our professional discussions and experience have mainly been with others in Europe and North America. This has inevitably shaped our approaches to studying cities. While we have tried to move beyond the specifics of our urban experiences in this book, by focusing on exploring the broader processes shaping cities, where we make these abstract ideas concrete we will often draw on examples from our own experiences. Therefore, the coverage of examples used and issues raised will, like other textbooks, not reflect the urban world in all its diversity. This is where we invite you to build on what we have written here and to add your own perspectives and experiences. Throughout the book we have tried to offer you exercises and opportunities to reflect on your own knowledge of the urban and to consider the ways in which the urban realities that you inhabit and experience are shaped by these broader processes. So let us begin with your urban geographies . . .

## Your urban geographies

This is a book written first and foremost for students. Its objective, therefore, is to equip you, the student with enough knowledge of cities and the ways that they have been thought about and researched, primarily but not exclusively from within urban geography, to allow you to understand key aspects of cities and to become an urban geographer in your own right.

As a student of urban geography, or one of its many cognate disciplines, you are likely to encounter cities and to address urban questions in many different

ways. These may include abstract discussions of urban theory; essays and reports that ask you to pull together, synthesize and analyse a range of examples, typically in the light of theory or policy; assignments that require you to analyse secondary data and draw conclusions on the basis of this; or projects that ask you to go out and conduct some original research and collect your own data in one or more urban settings. Of the latter the fieldtrip and the independent study or dissertation are among the most common, and typically, most rewarding, academic encounters with the city. Cities are such fascinating environments that it would be a great shame if this book did not encourage you to brave the weather and to get out and study the city, to perhaps look at the taken for granted urban environment that you pass through every day with fresh eyes. Alternatively, you might encounter the city through its many representations – films, novels, advertisements, media reports or computer games for example – and be asked to critically analyse the nature of these images and perhaps their significance. So, as you read this book think about what motivates you and about what you want your urban geographies to be, where they might take you and what they might contribute to the city. There is more to urban geography than just writing essays.

So, where do you begin? Well, for a start, it is unlikely that those of you reading this book have not encountered a city in some way or another, either as a resident of one or through reference to cities and urban life through a range of media, such as a book, television programme or film. It is worthwhile, therefore, asking you to reflect on what you already know about cities.

### **Exercise**

A range of definitions, concepts and ideas associated with the terms ‘city’ and ‘urban’ exist. It is important that you are aware of the variety of ways in which urban areas can be defined and thought about. As a student developing your understanding of cities, it is useful to reflect on the ideas about urban areas that you already hold and how these link to broader ideas and beliefs. Either individually or in conversation with family, friends or classmates think about the following question (and do not read on before you have generated your own thoughts and reflections!):

What do the terms ‘city’ and ‘urban’ mean to you? Make a list of things that you think define ‘the city’ or ‘the urban’.

Hopefully the list you have generated is quite diverse, and this should give you an indication of the breadth of material that can be covered when examining cities. Your list may include things that define urban areas

(population size, geographical boundaries, legal definitions), things urban areas possess (landscapes, buildings, infrastructure, activities) or attributes associated with the city (noisy, crowded, dangerous, creative, exciting, vibrant, polluted). It might also identify urban concerns at different levels, or geographical scales, from personal issues (conditions in your local neighbourhood) to things of global concern (the sustainability of urban growth). This indicates that there is not one city but many ‘cities’ and also many topics for urban geographers to study.

## Developing your urban geographies

Your personal experiences of, and knowledge about, cities are an important starting point for developing your understanding of ‘the urban’. However, as theories of learning suggest, personal experience in itself is not sufficient to develop thorough knowledge of an issue, and this experience needs to be built upon in order to develop a deeper understanding through a ‘cycle of learning’ (see Kolb 1984). So in order to develop your critical understanding of cities you need to reflect on your experiences and make sense of these by contextualizing your experience and knowledge in relation to other information about cities. Here you need to use your research skills to gather appropriate data/evidence on urban trends and issues – in the section below we outline some broad trends in contemporary urban development which will provide a starting point for thinking about these wider issues and setting your experiences in context, which will then be further developed throughout the book. The next stage of the ‘cycle’ in developing your critical understanding is to think about your experiences and this broader evidence and make sense of these through abstract conceptualization. Here you will draw upon wider theories and concepts about urban development, change and experience in order to draw together these various strands of evidence and place them in the broader context of writing about cities. In the next chapter we will consider the development of urban geographical theory in order to provide a foundation for your own theorizing. Through this you will develop your critical knowledge and understanding about cities and urban life which will provide the foundation for your further experiences of and research into cities, so completing one round of the learning cycle.

In beginning to build on our more personal experiences of urban life and set these into a wider context we want to consider three important ideas underpinning the multiple geographies of the urban world which highlight some key trends in urban development and ways of thinking about cities. The first important idea is to place ourselves within the broader trends of urban development and change, or rather to consider the macro geographies of

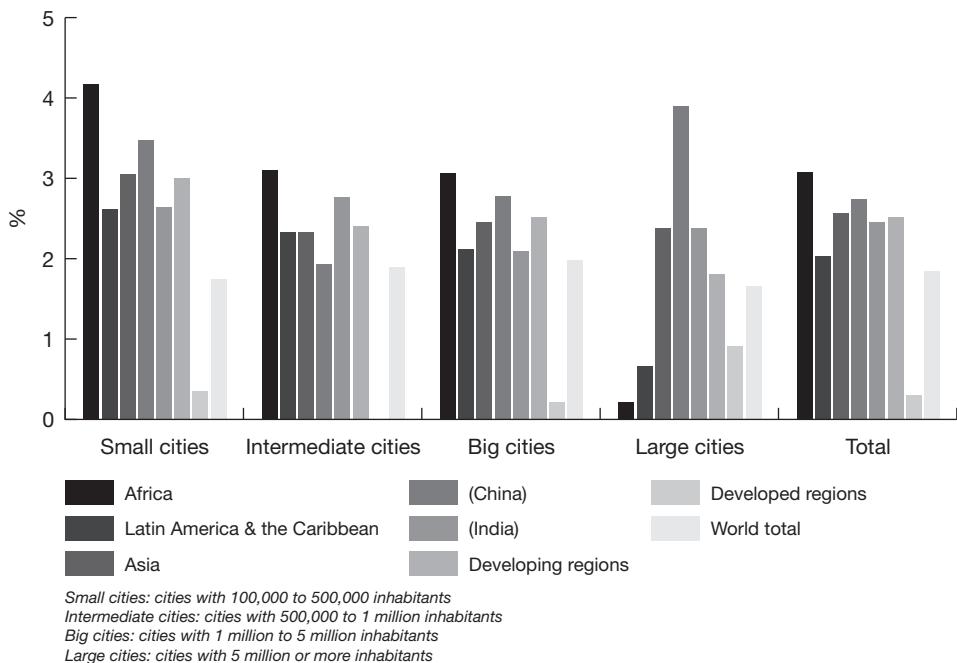
the urban world. Here it is useful to examine broad patterns in urban development at the global scale which emphasize the diversity in trends around the world. A second important idea to consider is the increasing connectedness of the world, where people and places are increasingly linked together in complex economic, political and cultural networks. Finally, it is important to consider how these broader processes are mediated by local contexts, thinking about the internal geographies of cities and the complexity of our urban lives and experiences. These key ideas about the urban world are introduced in the next section and underpin subsequent discussions about the urban which follow in the book.

## Macro geographies of the urban world

---

A core question for anyone interested in studying cities is how many urban people there are in the world and where they live. Until the second half of the twentieth century significant urban development, or urbanization, was limited and spatially concentrated into a number of key regions, principally Europe, North America and Latin America. More recently, within these more urbanized societies, urban growth has been slow and the increases in urban populations relatively modest (figure 1.1). The most significant growth in the last thirty years has taken place in those parts of the world with low percentages of urban populations, with this predicted to increase in the near future. In particular, urban growth has been rapid in Asia, with China and India having particularly large and increasing urban populations. Growth has also been significant within Africa (figure 1.1).

Within these broad regional figures significant variation exists, and a more detailed examination of the recent trends in urbanization reveals that the urban world is far from uniform. Urban development is certainly changing the spatial organization of the world's economy and society, but at different rates in different places which leads to interesting questions for urban geographical research to examine. Globally there remains considerable variation in both the size and proportion of populations in urban places and the ways in which these populations are distributed, in terms of the number and size of cities (figure 1.1). For example, while much of China's growth has been in the form of large cities, urban growth within Africa has been predominantly of small and intermediate cities, with more significant urban growth confined to a small number of countries on this continent. Equally, the modest growth in cities in developing regions has been polarized, with gains in smaller towns and cities and something of a renaissance for some of the larger cities in these regions, which had been experiencing a decline in their populations.



**Figure 1.1 Annual growth rate of the world's cities by region and city size 1990–2000**

Source: Adapted from UN-HABITAT Global Urban Observatory (2008)

The United Nations is a key source of data on the trends in urban growth, publishing its World Urbanization Prospects biannually and an annual Demographic Year Book. However, while being a useful source of information, the figures published should be viewed with caution as the number of people living in cities around the world is difficult to accurately define. In analysing current urban trends there is a fine line to be drawn between making useful general observations and a vague oversimplification of the changes taking place (Clark 2003).

### Exercise

Consider figure 1.1 again – what problems might there be in collecting and collating the data for a chart such as this? Think in particular about how data might be collected about the number of urban dwellers and how you might define what constitutes an urban area.

Once you have generated some ideas, visit the UN Global Urban Observatory website ([ww2.unhabitat.org/programmes/guo/](http://www2.unhabitat.org/programmes/guo/)) and compare your ideas with the information

presented there about how their data sets have been compiled. This should highlight the variations around the world in the ways, frequencies, and so on in which census information is collected and how urban areas are defined.

From looking at the data an important issue emerges for those studying ‘the urban’, namely that most of the world’s urban population live outside the developed world and also mainly in smaller or medium sized cities.

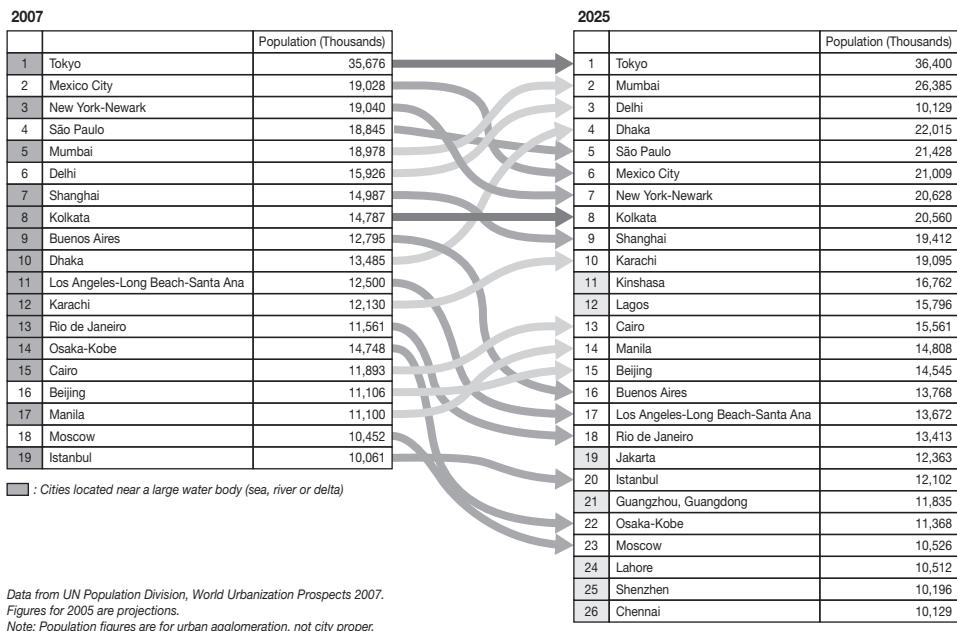
Yet much of the urban geographical writing on cities that has been widely published has focused on larger cities, located within developed regions. It is therefore clearly a challenge to urban scholars to address these issues and to produce work that speaks to the urban world in its full diversity (Hubbard 2006; Robinson 2005a).

## Connectivity, power and world cities

Another key urban trend has been the increase in the number and location of the world’s mega cities, defined as those with over 10 million inhabitants. It is predicted that the number of mega cities in the world will increase to 27 by 2025, with the majority of these being located outside the developed world (see figure 1.2). The city of Mumbai is predicted to become the largest mega city after Tokyo, which will retain its top spot, while many mega cities in developed regions, such as New York-Newark, will slip down the rankings. The increasing number and changing distribution of these large global cities has captured the imagination of commentators and researchers in recent years. The emergence of new mega cities has prompted questions about the processes fuelling these changing patterns (urbanization), the varying role and status that cities in the world possess and the ways in which cities are connected to one another on a global scale. A fundamental question has been whether the rise of these new mega cities heralds a shift in the distribution of the planet’s most powerful and connected cities, or world cities.

Throughout the twentieth century, the colonial capitals and industrial cities of Northern Europe and North America were some of the world’s largest cities and acted as key nodes through which goods, information and people flowed and as centres where wealth was generated and power exercised. However, it is clear that the role and status of cities is shifting within our increasingly globalized world, where the speed, spread and depth of economic, political and cultural linkages is increasing and changing (Brenner and Keil 2006). The search for power and economic prosperity among a growing number of

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**Figure 1.2 The world's mega cities**

Source: Adapted from UN-HABITAT (2008)

large global cities, acting within an increasingly unstable and unpredictable world, has generated intense competition between cities to gain status by encouraging growth through city marketing and planning activities. Here cities are seen to be acting increasingly entrepreneurially in order to attract the right activities and people with which to stimulate growth (Hall and Hubbard 1996, 1998).

Recent research has also sought to quantify the relative power and connectivity of cities on a global scale, most notably the work of the Global and World Cities (GaWC) Research Group based at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom ([www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/index.html](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/index.html)). What this research suggests is that the most powerful and connected of the world's cities remain those of the Global North, despite their diminishing relative population size, and that the newly emerging mega cities of much of the Global South lack significant global economic and political power despite their large size. It should be noted, however, that the criteria generally used to define status can be seen as 'capitalist' and 'western' in their conception, potentially excluding many cities defined as globally important by other criteria (Robinson 2005b). An alternative view would consider all cities as

inherently global in some way but as differently positioned within a multitude of global networks (this is explored again in chapter two).

## Internal geographies of cities

Finally, the trends in growth and change in urban populations around the world raise a number of significant issues for city dwellers and the managers of cities. At the heart of these concerns is the long-term sustainability of current urban trends and lifestyles, particularly the environmental impacts of city growth and problems of poverty and inequality within cities. For example, as noted above, Mumbai in India is predicted to become the world's second largest mega city. Its current growth and increasing global profile have led to the city becoming something of a key exemplar of the issues and concerns that could face many cities in the twenty-first century. In particular, its use in a number of recent books and films has led to wider global public awareness of the city and the issues it faces. For example, the widely acclaimed film *Slumdog Millionaire* released in late 2008 was set against the backdrop of Mumbai.

The film's story highlights both the magic and the horrors of life within this vast and rapidly changing city, and also some of the realities of everyday life in the city and the problems of poverty faced by many of its inhabitants. Consideration of films such as this that highlight life within cities should raise questions in our minds about why life portrayed in the city is the way it is and also the extent to which this is similar to or different from that with which we are familiar from our own urban experiences. Indeed, these are some of the key questions about urban life, or urbanism, that have been long-standing concerns of urban geographers, among others.

Yet, concerns about the impacts of rapid urban growth and change and the problems of life in cities are not merely a twenty-first century phenomenon. Anxieties about urban life have been evident since the rise of large industrial cities in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. The rapid, largely unplanned, growth of these cities also generated fears about their social and environmental impact. Then, as now, these concerns were most eloquently expressed in some of the fictional writings of the period, such as the work of Charles Dickens on life in Britain's industrial towns in the nineteenth century. Much of his work graphically portrays the problems associated with poor living conditions within these cities:

It [Coketown] was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a

town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

(Charles Dickens (1854) *Hard Times*)

This work, among other fictional and non-fictional writing, contributed to the formation of negative attitudes to urban life (anti-urbanism), where the city became associated with problems of poverty, disease, pollution, violence and alienation (Gold and Revill 2004). However, the impact of this urban growth, and the anti-urban reactions to it, did help generate both research into cities and moves to better manage them which we consider later in the book. Yet despite these efforts, anti-urban representations of urban life remain prevalent. In particular, many visions of our planet's future within science fiction writing and film are set against backdrops of **dystopic** urban landscapes, which are either dark and menacing (such as in the film *Blade Runner*, 1982) or ruined and abandoned (such as in the film *Mad Max*, 1979) (Gold 2001). However, despite these numerous pessimistic visions, not everyone concurs with these nightmare scenarios and there is also optimism about the urban future. The idea of the city, and living within one, remains strong; one thing that we can be sure of is that cities are adaptable to new conditions and circumstances, both global and local in nature. Of immediate concern is how cities and urban populations can adapt to address important global concerns such as the use of the world's resources, climate change and world poverty and health. These are critical challenges facing the urban managers of today and tomorrow – we all have our part to play, perhaps yours will be a key one in the future!

## Summary and structure of the book

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Hopefully this opening chapter has provided you with a stimulating start to, or continuation of, your urban geographical journey. There is a great diversity of cities in the world, which possess both similar and unique characteristics and concerns, and also many ways of looking at the city, both from above and below, from the official to the personal and from different

cultural perspectives. We would hope that this has raised many questions for you about what is going on in the urban world, both locally to you and also further afield. The remainder of this book seeks to help you explore the issues identified in this introduction, and more, in greater depth, drawing on a wide range of information concerning cities, both from within urban geography and beyond.

The book is structured around three core sections; Contexts, Themes and Issues. The first section, of which this introductory chapter forms part, provides a series of Contexts, or foundations, for the study of urban geography. Also within this section, chapter two examines some of the significant theoretical and conceptual issues underpinning urban geographical study, while chapter three explores the diversity in the structure of the world's cities and how urban form varies over time and space. The section on Themes contains four chapters and examines some of the fundamental processes driving urban growth and change, which shape both cities and the lives of people within them. Chapter four examines economic processes, further examining the role of cities within the changing global economy and the impact that this has had on economic activities within cities. Chapter five considers politics and urban governance, examining the variety of ways in which cities are managed around the world and the balances of power that exist between various groups within cities. Chapter six develops the examination of city management by looking at the range of approaches and policies developed to plan the city and create better urban environments. Finally, in this section, chapter seven explores the social and cultural heterogeneity of cities and the ways in which this features within numerous dimensions of urban life. The final section of the book, Issues, considers some key questions about cities and aspects of urban life:

- Are cities built to be looked at or lived in? (Chapter eight considers the significance of architecture to the functional and symbolic form of cities and how this impacts on people's lives in the city.)
- Are images of cities important? (Chapter nine looks at a variety of representations of cities and the ways in which they are implemented in cultural politics and processes of urban development.)
- Are cities experienced as dreams or nightmares? (Chapter ten examines how we engage with the city in everyday life and whether this is a positive or negative experience for people.)
- Are cities able to provide a home for everyone? (Chapter eleven explores the fundamental role of the city as a residential space and considers why many cities cannot meet the housing needs of their populations.)
- Are cars killing cities? (Chapter twelve considers our mobility in cities and examines the transportation dilemmas facing many cities in the twenty-first century.)

- Are current trends in urbanization sustainable? (Chapter thirteen considers the impact of urban development on the environment and explores the key question running throughout the book of whether our increasing rates of urban growth, expanding cities and urban lifestyles are sustainable in the future.)

Why these questions? Well, they are issues that we consider important to discuss. It is not a definitive set, and we are sure that you could think of others. There is, therefore, a lot to explore! While this book will provide you with a comprehensive introduction to the study of urban geography, not everything there is to be known and explored is within these pages (even if we could achieve this, the resulting book would be too heavy and expensive to be of use to the majority of students!). The book, therefore, contains a number of features which will help to guide you to further sources of information and which are also designed to encourage you to engage actively with the book and its content. Each chapter includes:

- Five key ideas – these introduce each chapter and concisely capture their essential contents and conceptual material. Along with the glossary of terms, these can act as useful reference points and aid the development of your understanding of key urban themes.
- Highlighted terms – this identifies some of the specialist terms and concepts used in urban geography which are briefly defined and discussed in the glossary at the back of the book. The glossary can act as a useful reference point and basis for the further exploration of key themes and as an opportunity to test yourself on your knowledge and understanding of key ideas.
- Boxed case studies – these provide concise summaries and discussions of key, contemporary research on particular urban themes. Based on published papers, they are designed to highlight key authors and ideas and encourage you to follow-up and explore issues in greater depth, by using the case study article as the basis for further bibliographic searches.
- Follow-up activities – this section contains suggested questions, discussion topics, project ideas and research activities which you can use to develop both your knowledge of the key ideas and case studies introduced in the chapter and also to develop your study skills. The activities will make links with the further reading in the annotated bibliography at the end of the chapter.
- Annotated bibliography – this provides a list of some key books, journals and web resources which you can use as a starting point for your further investigation of a topic and to develop wider reading for projects or essays on a particular issue. Each source identified is accompanied by a brief note indicating what the source provides (note: summarizing sources that you

read is a useful skill that will help you in organizing and producing your assignments).

So let us now continue our journey and begin to delve a little deeper into the world of urban geography . . .

## Follow-up activities

Essay title: ‘What are some of the key issues facing cities around the world in the twenty-first century?’

### Commentary on essay title

*An effective answer would outline some of the key urban trends and issues introduced in this opening chapter and would provide some examples of these issues from cities around the world drawing on academic research into cities. It might also look to suggest which of these issues are the most challenging ones facing cities. An excellent answer would look to move beyond this extended list and critically explore why these issues face cities and why they present particular challenges. It would also look to set discussion more widely within academic writing on the city, evaluating different perspectives, or lenses, adopted to look at urban issues.*

### Project idea

Develop the idea of ‘your urban geographies’ introduced in this chapter. Develop a case study of the city you live in or a city that is familiar to you, gathering evidence to examine this city from the three perspectives outlined in this chapter: the macro geographies of your city, the connectivity of your city and the internal geographies of your city. What types of evidence can you gather to explore your city (for example, population statistics, economic data about companies operating in your city, field research, writings about your city, your own personal experiences)? Evaluate the evidence you gather and think about the benefits and problems of using different sources of data and in examining the city from a variety of perspectives.

## Further reading

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### Books

- Bell, D. and Jayne, M. (2006) *Small Cities: Urban Experience Beyond the Metropolis*, Abingdon: Routledge
 

An interesting collection of essays focusing on those cities not normally featured in general urban geographical writing.
- Clark, D. (2003) *Urban World / Global City*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge
 

Provides a useful overview of changes in global patterns of urbanization.
- LeGates, R.T. and Stout, F. (2007) *The City Reader*, 4th edn, Abingdon: Routledge
 

Brings together a wide range of key writings on cities.
- Pacione, M. (2009) *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective*, 3rd edn, Abingdon: Routledge
 

A key urban geography textbook; comprehensive coverage and written in a student-friendly way.
- UN HABITAT (2008) *The State of the World's Cities 2008/9: Harmonious Cities*, London: Earthscan
 

A comprehensive overview of trends in urbanization around the world and the issues facing cities by this key global organization.

### Journal Articles

- Gold, J.R. (2001) ‘Under darkened skies: the city in science-fiction film’, *Geography*, 86 (4): 337–345
 

Good introduction to the portrayal of the city in film and the idea of dystopian imagery.
- Nijman, J. (2007) ‘Comparative urbanism’, *Urban Geography*, 28: 1–6
 

A key author in recent debates about the need to extend geographical research to include more comparative studies, especially concerning cities beyond the Global North.
- Robinson, J. (2005) ‘Urban geography: world cities, or a world of cities’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 29: 757–765
 

A key article which challenges the ‘western’ focus of much urban geographical writing and theorizing.

- Shearmur, R. (2010) 'Editorial – A world without data? The unintended consequences of fashion in geography', *Urban Geography*, 31: 1009–1017

Recent article highlighting the need for quantitative data to underpin urban analysis.

- Taylor, P. and Walker, D.R.F. (2004) 'Urban hinterworlds revisited', *Geography*, 89: 145–151

Based on GaWC research ideas, the article considers the degree of connectivity between particular world cities.

## Websites

- Gapminder ([www.gapminder.org/](http://www.gapminder.org/)) – a very useful site containing a wealth of data on global socio-economic trends and variations which can be mapped to reveal global diversity and inequalities.
- Global and World Cities Research Centre (GaWC) ([www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/index.html](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/index.html)) – a wealth of research material into world cities and the connectivity of cities. Also displays some interesting maps showing world city connectivity.
- UN HABITAT website ([www.unhabitat.org/](http://www.unhabitat.org/)) – global organization concerned with the issues facing the world's cities. Contains a wealth of research and information.
- Urban Geography Research Group (UGRG) of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers ([www.urban-geography.org.uk/](http://www.urban-geography.org.uk/)) – website of the research group of academic geographers in Britain. Contains some useful links to other sites and some good book reviews of urban geography texts.

## 2

# Changing approaches

## Five key ideas

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- **Urban theory has undergone a series of radical shifts throughout its history.**
- **Despite these discontinuities a series of fundamental questions have always underpinned the work of urban geographers.**
- **Two major ongoing concerns of urban geographers are the internal natures of cities and the relationships of cities to wider contexts.**
- **Recent critical challenges have argued that urban theory is failing to reflect the cosmopolitanism of contemporary global urban diversity.**
- **An immediate challenge for urban geographers is to seek ways to ‘reimagine’ urban theory in the light of these challenges.**

## Introduction

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A discussion of the history of urban geography, how it has changed through time, is a standard aspect of all urban geography textbooks. Urban geography has been characterized by a number of radical shifts in its theoretical underpinnings, the aspects of the city that geographers are interested in and the methods they employ to study the city. It is important to be aware of this history and to realize that the ways that you will approach the study of cities are products of this history. These discussions tend to take one of two forms. Either they offer a broad historical review of the subject’s evolution (this was the approach adopted in previous editions of this book) or a focus on current issues or debates with reference to the subject’s evolution (see Robinson 2005a). These accounts all have a strongly chronological flavour. We do not aim to replicate these here. We want to take a more thematic approach. While the approaches that urban geographers have taken have been dynamic and changing, we can recognize a set of fundamental questions that represent enduring concerns of urban geographers.

Historically then, the study of cities is identifiable with continuities and discontinuities – continuities in terms of the basic questions cities pose, discontinuities in terms of how they have been studied and theorised.

(Paddison 2001: 4)

It is these ‘basic questions’ that we are primarily interested in considering in this chapter.

### **Exercise**

What do you consider to be the most important ‘basic questions cities pose’ (Paddison 2001: 4)? Before reading on see if you can think of four or five examples. Can you find examples from the academic literature of geographers studying these questions? Try to think about the different approaches that geographers have taken to these questions. Think in terms of the methods they have employed and any evidence of their theoretical stances on these issues. Is this how you would approach these questions? Can you think of alternative approaches?

## **Fundamental urban questions**

Brian Berry (1964: 147) concisely captured the conceptualization of cities, as reflected in the range of concerns of urban geographers, in his oft quoted phrase: ‘cities as systems within systems of cities’. This captures much of what urban geography has been concerned with since its emergence as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hubbard 2006). Namely an interest in exploring many facets of the internal lives of cities while recognizing that cities are part of wider contexts, be they systems or networks of cities or more general political or economic contexts.

We want to expand this conception of urban geography a little here. We would argue that there are at least two further areas of interest that are not so easily captured by Berry’s quotation above. In our view urban geographers have been interested in four fundamental, enduring themes. These are:

- the internal geographies of cities of various kinds;
- the relationships between cities and their wider contexts;
- exploring and accounting for global urban diversity;
- different ways of thinking about, defining, theorizing and researching the city.

We will use these four themes to guide our discussion of changing approaches to urban geography and its cognate disciplines within the remainder of the chapter.

## The internal nature of cities

Urban geographers have continually sought to make sense of the city's internal structure, to discern order within the seemingly chaotic. The origins of this impulse can be found in the birth of urban studies at the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, which was founded in 1913. The theoretical and methodological foundations laid down by pioneering urban scholars such as Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, among others, have been fundamental to a wide range of disciplines, including urban geography, concerned with the city.

Rather than plough through the detail of the successive attempts that geographers and others have made to understand the structure of cities (for such discussions please see the suggested reading at the end of the chapter) we simply want to isolate one dimension that urban scholars have looked at and which would seem to underpin the internal geographies of cities. This is the operation of power within the city and its associated processes of competition and conflict. In doing so we will discuss the different ways in which successive 'schools' or paradigms of urban geography thought about the operation of power in the city and how this influenced their views of the processes that shaped the internal structure of cities. We would not argue that this is the only dimension that one could choose, but for us it is illustrative of key changes in thinking across the history of urban geography.

Drawing on ideas from the natural sciences, the Chicago School talked of human ecology and explored competition between groups of people with differing abilities to pay economic rent for land. From this they argued that the land use patterns and patterns of residential segregation reflected equilibria between the abilities of different groups to pay economic rent, their needs and inter-group competition. Despite their interest in economic power these researchers were not blind to culture as a force shaping cities, noting ethnicity and other facets of lifestyle as a factor producing communities within cities. From this view of the city as an arena of competition stemmed a number of urban models that represented the first attempts to systematically understand the structure of the city and to tie this to underlying causal processes (Pacione 2009). Widely known and applied models to date from this period included Burgess' concentric zone model and Hoyt's sector model (see Pacione 2001a and chapter three).

In the 1950s and 1960s the social sciences became increasingly concerned with producing rigorous, statistical explorations of society that pursued a **nomothetic** search to unearth regularities, general laws and patterns of human behaviour. This was facilitated by significant advances in computer technology and the desire of the social sciences to attain credibility and relevance (Hubbard 2006). This approach was particularly influential in geography that began to be described as a **postivist**, spatial science. In urban geography this partly took the form of testing the urban models either from the Chicago School or subsequent ones that were much influenced by their work. Influential work from this period included explorations of the social areas of cities (Shevky and Bell 1955) and later factorial ecology that sought to identify the socio-economic and cultural factors that underpinned urban spatial patterns (see Knox and Pinch 2010: 67–73 and chapter eleven).

Despite the undoubtedly technical sophistication of this work it was subject to a number of criticisms by the late 1960s. These included criticisms of inherent flaws, such as its unrealistic views of human beings and their knowledge of the environment and consequently the poor predictability of urban models (Pacione 2009). However, ultimately more damning were criticisms of spatial science's lack of ability to say anything about a number of emerging urban crises linked to poverty, inequality and conflict in cities of the Global North at the time. Put simply, positivist urban geography lacked relevance and engagement with the topical urban issues of the time. Despite the efforts of an influential behavioural offshoot (see Goodey and Gold 1985; Walmsley and Lewis 1993; Kitchin 1994), which by drawing on environmental psychology aimed to more accurately model the processes of human perception and cognition, this particular brand of urban geography saw its influence wane into the 1970s.

Interestingly, while the origins of the Chicago School of urban studies lay in explorations of one rapidly industrializing city, the origins of the approach that came to replace spatial science in urban geography can be traced back in part to Friedrich Engels' (1844) revelations of the horrors of another, Manchester, during his time there in the 1840s. This, and Engels' subsequent work with **Karl Marx**, were key influences on the emergence of **structuralist** approaches across the social sciences in the early 1970s. Engels, and structuralists more generally, saw power in rather different terms to the Chicago School and their followers. Emphasizing inequality and the exploitation of the working class, structuralism within urban geography focused on class as the key dimension of urban life and saw social and spatial outcomes as the consequences of structural changes within the capitalist **regime of accumulation** (Pacione 2009).

Structuralist, or neo-Marxist, urban geographies then were very different to the positivist ones that had preceded them. These were urban geographies underpinned often by a strong normative impulse, a sense of what should be (Hubbard 2006; Pacione 2009). In some cases these convictions prompted researchers to take on activist roles or positions overtly critical of planning and government policy, which were felt to be instrumental in the maintenance of unequal class relations and the propping-up of capitalism. Some of the key works from this period included *Social Justice and the City* (1973) by David Harvey (a ‘reformed’ positivist) and *The Urban Question* (translated into English in 1977) and *The City and the Grassroots* (1983) by Manuel Castells.

Many of the key works in this paradigm explored the dynamics of investment in urban property markets. They interpreted these patterns as attempts to resolve periodic crises within capitalism, charting the social and economic consequences of this dynamic through processes such as gentrification (Smith 1996), suburban development, deindustrialization and urban abandonment. Although subject to a number of criticisms, often referring to its failure to adequately incorporate human agency into its analysis (see Savage *et al.*’s (2003: 52–53) criticisms of David Harvey for example) it retained a prominence within urban geography and indeed its influence is still felt today.

An alternative perspective that arose primarily within urban sociology focused not on power in terms of class positions and conflict but rather in terms of the ability of key individuals, urban managers and gatekeepers, to control access to resources in the city (Pacione 2009).

Such actors included housing managers, planners, estate agents, mortgage lenders, financiers, police, councillors and architects. Collectively and individually, it was argued these actors could deny certain social groups access to particular property markets (and hence particular parts of the city).

(Hubbard 2006: 32–33)

Despite the focus on individual actors their actions tended still to be interpreted in terms of the maintenance of class relations.

The urban managerialist approach, in emphasizing conflict, racism and inequalities in wealth and power in less abstract terms than neo-Marxist forms of structuralism made some important contributions to urban studies (see Pahl 1970; Rex and Moore 1974; Rex and Tomlinson 1979). In highlighting the barriers to access to resources, such as housing, for many in the city, they destabilized positivist models of the city in which such constraints were largely absent (Hubbard 2006) (see also chapter eleven).

The desire to unpack the internal structure of the city remains a strong impulse within urban geography, with recent contributions including attempts to model the post-industrial, post-modern or global metropolis (see discussion below and chapter three). However, work in this vein has tended to shift in one of two directions, either looking at how specific processes, such as gentrification for example, play out within cities or, alternatively, adopting more ethnographic approaches or ones that seek to explore more the meanings of urban spaces (Pacione 2009). We will look at some of this work later in the chapter and throughout the book.

## Cities and wider contexts

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As Brian Berry's (1964) quotation (see p. 19) reminds us, one of the key interests of urban geographers has been, and remains, the question of the relationships between cities and wider contexts, however these may be construed. Although not a central concern of positivist approaches it was present in their interest in urban systems, for example, Christaller's **central place** theory (Hubbard 2006: 32). However, this dimension of the urban has been much more a concern of other approaches and is something we have seen a growing interest in recently. Again, the question of power, in this case the operation of power upon cities and the power of cities themselves, provides a useful lens through which to examine the ways in which urban geographers have approached this in a number of different ways.

A recurrent concern among structuralist urban geographers has been the impacts of structural changes on cities, the wider context in this case seen as the capitalist system or the global economy. The city, in being regarded as a crucial site of the resolution of periodic crises within capitalism, was often considered as 'victim'. Work in this vein emphasized the destructive impacts of uneven development in processes like deindustrialization and urban development. Later work, however, argued that cities were not as helpless as this view might suggest and explored the ways in which cities and space were also active in shaping the processes of ongoing development (Massey and Meegan 1982; Massey 1984).

More recently an interest in the geographies of globalization has focused attention on a number of global cities (London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles and Tokyo among others) as crucial lynch pins within the global economy, highlighting the connectivity between these cities and, concomitantly, the implications for those cities that are not part of these networks (Brenner and Keil 2006; Kim 2008). The notion of the links between even the most mundane urban spaces has gained a significant foothold theoretically and analytically within urban geography following

Doreen Massey's arguments for a 'global sense of place' (1994). Here she argues that places should not be seen as closed, bounded, coherent entities, but rather as open, complex and interconnected to ranges of other spaces through links associated with travel, migration, trade, commerce and culture, as well as more personal biographies and memories. Here again though, Massey recognizes power at play, arguing that while some spaces are the originators of many connections, shaping the geographies of other spaces around the world, other, perhaps less 'powerful', spaces, tend to be, overwhelmingly, the receivers of connections or connected in ways that do not allow them the power to shape spaces elsewhere. In this case they are more shaped than shapers. Since Massey first introduced the idea of places as networked in this way there has been a significant interest in the application of a variety of network approaches in human geography which we are seeing increasingly applied to analysis of cities (Amin 2002b; Amin and Thrift 2002). We are likely, therefore, to see a growing interest in research based around notions of connectivity within urban geography in the future (see discussions on this subject later in this book).

## Global urban diversity

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A number of commentators (Eade and Mele 2002; Hubbard 2006; Robinson 2002, 2005a; Roy 2009) have noted something of a crisis in urban theory recently. We have witnessed the emergence of theoretical perspectives (feminist, post-modern, post-colonial, for example) that are both radically different to and explicitly critical of theoretical perspectives on the city that stemmed from positivist and structuralist traditions and which, until recently, dominated urban thinking across a number of disciplines. The rise of these alternative perspectives can be interpreted as a failure of 'traditional' urban theory to reflect, or be able to engage with, the realities of global urban diversity. Jennifer Robinson (2002, 2005a) has gone as far as arguing that urban theory risks becoming irrelevant if it remains narrowly focused on certain aspects of life in cities of the Global North at a time when current trends in urbanization are profoundly shifting the distribution of urban populations towards the Global South (see chapter one). Not only has urban theory failed, thus far, to respond to these trends but it has also failed to embrace the diversities of city life globally, remaining too fixated on a narrow set of social divisions (especially class based divisions) that were more applicable to cities in a particular place (the Global North) at a particular time (the twentieth century) than they are to the diversity of cities and urban lifestyles around the world now.

Robinson is particularly critical of the tendency of urban theory to transfer or 'universalise' 'located and parochial assumptions' (2005a: 6) from the small

set of cities in which they were devised to other, very different, cities elsewhere. The effects of this have been either that the assumptions are irrelevant to the cities to which they have been applied, or, that in not fitting into these assumptions and models, certain cities are relegated and defined as ‘other’ or simply seen in terms of under-development or in terms only of what they lack in relation to other cities. The application of western urban theory then to cities elsewhere may be disempowering, a tendency regarded as colonial in its effects. There is a danger then, following this, that this application of urban theory can create hierarchies, categories and divisions to which cities are consigned. Much of the impulse behind the emergence of new perspectives and alternative urban theories is to resist this colonial, disempowering impulse and to produce urban theories that are able to recognize cities on their own terms and to accommodate global urban diversity. As Robinson argues: ‘we need a form of theorising that can be as cosmopolitan as the cities we try to describe’ (2005a: 3).

Hubbard (2006) is similarly critical of urban theory’s attempts to account for recent trends in urbanization in cities of the west. These cities are being increasingly affected by a number of economic, political, social and cultural factors that were neither anticipated nor included in positivist and later structuralist models and theories of the city and which appear to raise questions about some key aspects and assumptions of these perspectives. These processes, often referred to under the banner of post-modern urbanization, have included deindustrialization, the rise of entrepreneurial forms of urban governance, increasing levels of social polarization and fragmentation and the reconfiguration of both individual and group identities in new, multiple and complex ways through practices such as consumption, migration and leisure that are increasingly central to the urban experience. They have exposed earlier urban theory as overly rigid, crude and inflexible. It is not that recent urban theory has failed to notice these changes. Indeed, there has been much written about them by many urban geographers and others from cognate disciplines (see Harvey 1989a; Soja 1989, 1996; Davis 1990; Watson and Gibson 1995; Dear and Flusty 2005), a significant proportion of which is based upon analysis of Los Angeles, a city that has become constructed as the archetypal post-modern city (see also chapter three). Rather, much of what has been produced has been done from within the theoretical straightjacket of twentieth century urban theory that has been unable to offer sufficiently cosmopolitan, to use Robinson’s term, urban theory through which to speak of these changes (Hubbard 2006: 42–55).

Criticisms of these attempts to theorize the post-modern city have included questions about the representativeness of Los Angeles. As with earlier manifestations of urban theory we have seen here a tendency to universalize insights derived from the specific analysis of Los Angeles. Further, these

accounts have been accused of producing top-down perspectives that have failed to include the grounded multiple realities of the cities under scrutiny (Ley and Mills 1993). This, it has been argued, is both disempowering and reductionist, erasing the subtle contours of social difference and experience within different cities.

### **Exercise**

Look at some of the writing on Los Angeles from writers such as Davis, Soja or Dear and Flusty. How transferable, do you think, are their views of post-modern urbanization to urban settings with which you are familiar? How different, and in what ways, would our view of post-modern urbanization be had it been based more extensively around explorations of cities other than Los Angeles?

Despite an avowed engagement with the complexities of global urban diversity and the processes of post-modern urbanization, these accounts seem to have failed to escape the tendencies to abstraction and reductionism typical of twentieth century urban theory.

While there is a widely noted dissatisfaction with the ‘will to abstraction’ which forced the city to conform to abstract models, categorisations and languages, urban scholars have often fallen back on these very forms of abstraction in their attempts to comprehend new forms of urbanity.

(Hubbard 2006: 55)

### **Thinking about the city**

Having read our brief gallop through the history of urban geography you may be asking, quite rightly, how this is relevant to your own practice as a budding urban geographer. We want to stress three points here. First, it is important to reiterate that the urban geography that you will undertake is the product of a long evolution of theory, methods and concerns. Your urban geographies then will be shaped by this history. Second, it is important to stress that debate, even disagreement, is very much alive within urban geography. The gauntlet thrown down by Jennifer Robinson and other post-colonial theorists, for example, is evidence of this. You have choices as an urban geographer then. Debates to weigh up and maybe participate in. Think critically about your urban geographies, where they come from and what alternatives exist. This will make you a more effective and incisive urban geographer and will bring the subject alive to you. This is something

that all of the urban geographers that you will read about in this and other books have gone through, and continue to do so. Third, thinking in terms of theory is a vital part of urban geography. While empirical investigation of cities is important, the significance of case studies is only really apparent when they are connected to bigger questions. What then do the case studies that you look at and issues that you research yourselves tell you about how the city works? In what ways do the findings of these investigations connect to the more fundamental issues that we have outlined here and what do they reveal about them? Thinking theoretically about cities is an important skill for any urban geographer, it will produce richer, more critical urban geographies rather than ones that are naïve or descriptive.

## Summary

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This chapter has not attempted to offer a detailed, comprehensive account of changing approaches within urban geography. It has said nothing for example about humanistic approaches (see, for example, Relph 1976, 1987 and chapter ten). It has tried to offer a flavour of the way in which the subject has evolved around a number of key questions, some reasons why and the contributions it has drawn from cognate disciplines. It should be seen as an introduction to this important field that can be explored in greater depth through the readings outlined below.

## Follow-up activities

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Essay title: ‘We need a form of theorising that can be as cosmopolitan as the cities we try to describe’ (Robinson 2005a: 3). Discuss Robinson’s challenge to urban theory and the ways that we might go about constructing an alternative, ‘cosmopolitan’ urban theory.

### Commentary on essay title

*An effective answer would reiterate the key points of Robinson’s critique of urban theory, perhaps making reference to other writers who have raised similar points. This would cover both her criticisms of the colonial tendencies of this theory and the basis that she proposes for an alternative. An excellent answer would then move beyond Robinson’s work to consider the work of others who have proposed alternatives to prevailing forms of urban theory. The papers by Rao and Wolch in the further reading below would be relevant here as well as some of the critiques outlined by Hubbard.*

### Project idea

‘Current trends in urbanization are making the cities of the Global North a peripheral part of the urban world.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement? Can you gather evidence to support your position? What types of evidence have you used (for example, population statistics, economic, political or cultural power)? Do all of these forms of evidence tell the same story? What alternatives could you chose and how would this affect your argument?

## Further reading

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### Books

- Amin, A. and Thrift, N. (2002) *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Cambridge: Polity  
A radical reimagining of the boundaries and concerns of urban geography. Fuel to the fire of recent debates.
- Hubbard, P. (2006) *City*, Abingdon: Routledge (Chapter 1: ‘Urban theory, modern and post-modern’)  
Phil Hubbard offers one of the most readable and comprehensive accounts of the history of urban theory currently available.
- Pacione, M. (2009) *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective*, London: Routledge  
Pacione’s book is about the most comprehensive overview of urban geography that is currently available. Chapter 2 ‘Concepts and theory in urban geography’ is particularly relevant to the discussion in this chapter.
- Robinson, J. (2005) *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*, Abingdon: Routledge  
Jennifer Robinson offers some fundamental criticisms of the urban theory that has tended to hold sway across a range of disciplines. Her arguments are fully laid out in this book.
- Savage, M., Warde, A. and Ward, K. (2003) *Urban Sociology, Capitalism and Modernity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave  
Although not specifically from an urban geography perspective, this book contains some clear-eyed, critical evaluation of a range of urban theory.