Propinquity in the City: Relational, Spatial, and Situational Urban Propinquity

Over the course of the last century, cities were mostly planned around the separation and formalization of different aspects of life, for instance, by deliberately creating distances between work, home, leisure, shopping, and recreation (Ellin, 1997, p. 21). But today, urban planning is instead committed to the opposite tack of trying to unify these separated spheres by bringing people together in meaningful ways (Gillette, 2010). Despite a general trend of decreasing built-up densities in the world today (UN-Habitat, 2016, p. 129), a relentless drive toward compaction and densification is creating new spatial proximities between people pursuing different lives, vocations, and activities in cities.

In tandem, ubiquitous communication technologies and social media platforms, which connect many different facets of urban life, are creating new forms of proximities. It has become possible for people who are further apart to be more closely connected via Twitter and WhatsApp than people who are nearer to each other. Together, this phenomenon of the city as a dense agglomeration of diverse people, ideas, and
opportunities—a closely packed “mongrel” crossroad characterized by the attributes of heterogeneity, multiplicity, and otherness (Sandercock, 2003, p. 1)—attracts a large number of people moving from city to city, and from countryside into cities: setting into perpetual motion an unprecedented flow of people constantly in search of better working conditions and life. In this, the contemporary city has also become the de facto site of many new propinquities.

Clearly, propinquity matters: not only does propinquity present new pressures and opportunities for encounters and interactions between strangers, but it can also establish the ethical prospect of neighborliness (Painter, 2012). If the central ethical problem of any global city today is how to generate collaboration among strangers who share little in common (Ignatieff, 2014), but if these strangers at least share propinquity, then this begs the questions if propinquity forms the starting point of an urban ethic that can lead to collaboration? If so, how then does one begin to frame propinquity through ethics? In a milieu where urban insecurity is rife—and not least because of an unprecedented influx of new strangers into cities—the moral appeal, if there is one, between a state of propinquity with neighborliness and one without neighborliness, appears clear.

According to Reis (2007), propinquity first refers to the proximity of physical distance, or physical closeness, between people; this is also the typical meaning of propinquity. But propinquity can also be defined in terms of functional distance, which is the likelihood of coming into contact with another person (Reis, 2007). Cities excel in simultaneously reducing both physical and functional distances. In terms of the former, compaction, densification, and mixed-use urban design, all facilitated by the different modes of urban mobility available today (e.g., bike-sharing), have greatly reduced physical distances between people in the city. And in terms of the latter, people are already meeting in urban places—for instance, the marketplace (or the commercial belt), the coffee shop, or the recreation park and playground—in the course of their everyday life, where functional distances are naturally diminished.

But because neither physical nor functional distance can specify the different types of propinquity that can occur in the city, it is important to further distinguish between relational, spatial, and
temporal (or situational) propinquity (see Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008, p. 157). First and foremost, relational propinquity suggests close relations—family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, who may claim a special priority in our relationships. Clearly, relational propinquity is neither dependent on spatial propinquity, nor on situational propinquity, even though certain classes of relational propinquity—especially between nearby neighbors, or colleagues who are collaborating on a shared idea—may emerge after a while because of persistent spatial propinquity. In the context of the city, the relational propinquity of closely knitted neighbors deserves special attention, only if because the formation of these neighborly relations is likely facilitated at least in part by the design of the built environment, which can moderate spatial propinquity. Change this design slightly, and these neighbors might either encounter each other differently, or may never get to meet at all.

On the other hand, spatial propinquity suggests close physical distance. While close physical distance describes the state of spatial proximity, it can also be an outcome of relational propinquity. This possible correlation between spatial and relational propinquity however does not yield to any predetermined order of priority: that is, does spatial propinquity lead to relational propinquity, or is it the other way? In all likelihood, the relationship between spatial propinquity and relational propinquity is likely to be bidirectional in cities. Nevertheless, and independently on its own, spatial propinquity says nothing substantive of any form of relational propinquity. For example, the person who lives in the adjacent apartment is typically called a neighbor. But neighborliness, which is a robust sign of relational propinquity, does not necessarily follow from being just neighbors—even though spatial propinquity, as discussed earlier, is surely an important factor for establishing relational propinquity in this example.

The city also renders spatial propinquity salient in another way. The design of the built environment has been observed to play a pivotal role in modifying the quality of functional distance between neighbors, which in turn could impact the formation of social groups and their social capital (Halpern, 2005, pp. 264–265). In an early comparative study between two student accommodations—one characterized by a double-loaded corridor-type with bedrooms on either side, while the
other was a suite-style design with bedrooms organized into a cluster of three sharing a common lounge and bathroom—students from the corridor-type of accommodation were found to be exposed to many social encounters that were unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unwanted (Baum & Valins, 1977, p. 28). In contrast, students from the suite-style accommodation experienced interactions that were controlled, which facilitated the development of more comfortable and effective encounters that in turn built social capital.

In light of these findings, the design of the urban built environment is expected to not only moderate, but also mediate, spatial propinquity in important ways. At times, this spatial propinquity is unstructured—for instance, when one is amidst the closeness of packed bodies on an extremely crowded commuter train during peak hours. But when structured, such spatial propinquity regularizes encounters that also engender certain people as neighbors while marking others out as strangers, and where the preconditions of a better or worse neighborly relation are established. This is not to overstate the role of the physical environment in determining behavior. Instead, this is about how the physical environment can come to play a fairly significant role in affecting behavior (Schrijver, 2015), and specifically in this case, how it is also able to demarcate a neighbor from strangers through spatial propinquity. Returning to the study by Baum and Valins (1977) again, it is likely that in the corridor-type student accommodation, neighbors were not so easily distinguishable from strangers. But in contrast, the suite-style type of student accommodation ensured that only a close group of roommates would get to encounter each other in the common areas, and this arrangement made neighbors more distinguishable from strangers. The differences then impacted how neighborly relations were formed—or not—in these two different spatial environments.

Finally, and in contrast to the preceding two types of propinquity, situational propinquity suggests the state of closeness between people either through chanced encounters, or events in the city. In this sense, situational propinquity is simultaneously the manifestation, and also the outcome of reduced functional distances within the city. Especially effective as a way of explaining the unexpected propinquity that occurs during urban events against a presumably more predictable form
of propinquity structured by urban space configurations, the situational dimension of propinquity comes close to the serendipitous, which will be further elucidated in Chapter 5.

**Why Is Propinquity Morally Significant?**

**Propinquity and Its Effects on Human Relations**

In understanding urban propinquity in this threefold way, it is possible to further derive how these different forms of urban propinquity can interact to produce new propinquities. For example, Reis (2007) suggests that physical proximity tends to increase the frequency of encounters, which can create further opportunities for the likelihood of interaction. In other words, spatial propinquity can further foster possibilities for relational propinquity—for instance, when neighbors interact regularly, which can lead to neighborly relations between them. Conversely, situational propinquity—for instance, in the chanced meeting of a prospective roommate during a social event—can also lead to spatial or relational propinquity. These possibilities demonstrate that not only does propinquity matter, but that it also presents special opportunities and pressures for new encounters and interactions (Painter, 2012). In turn, these form the openings to new ethical relationships in the city. After all, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) suggests that it is the encounter with the Other as neighbor that gives rise to the possibility of ethics (Painter, 2012, p. 528).

Furthermore, spatial propinquity in the form of close physical distances can lead to the formation of the “proximity effect” (see Goodfriend, 2009), which suggests a positive correlation between physical proximity and attraction. In other words, the closer an individual is to another person in space, the more likely this individual will be attracted to that person. But this proximity effect applies in the reverse as well: The closer an individual is to another person, it is just as likely for dislike to intensify with proximity (Reis, 2007). Beyond the proximity effect and according to Glaeser (2011, pp. 34–35), spatial propinquity in the form of face-to-face encounter and interaction
can also lead to more trust, generosity, and cooperation on one hand, but on the other hand, they can also spur competition. While Glaeser (2011, p. 35) prefers to focus on the productivity gains from the competition that arises because of propinquity, however the agglomeration of heterogeneous people can also lead to what Foster and Iaione (2016, p. 312) call, “the strain of proximity”—when propinquity results in rivalry and conflict. Indeed, the sentiments of fear and antagonism, which are also surfaced by the encounter of difference and otherness in spatial propinquity, ought to be anticipated as well (see Sandercock, 2003, p. 109).

Along this same vein of thought, spatial propinquity in cities—especially in the state of being constantly near to people—may also trigger the need for solitude, privacy, and peace (Tonkiss, 2003, 2005), which is a desire to be away from the overwhelming nearness to many others all the time. Tonkiss (2003, p. 298) rightly thinks that in the contemporary drive to emphasize the city as a space of differences characterized by constant propinquity of plural people and activities, this other perspective of the city marked by isolation, anonymity, dissociation, and loneliness has been suppressed. After all, one of the perennial things people desire from cities is “to get away from the crowd” (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 29).

On this point, one is reminded of the poignant story of the late George Bell in New York City, who lived, and died alone, in his apartment unnoticed, “under the pale light of obscurity” (see Kleinfield, 2015). Despite having lived in one of the most cosmopolitan and energetic cities in the world today, Bell’s passing went unnoticed and was furthermore dissociated from the social gaze of the city. What could have led the late Mr. Bell to live and then die alone like this—bereft of the very social and emotional resources that are associated with the city? Tonkiss’s (2003) account, together with the poignant realities of loneliness in the city, reveal that while urban propinquity can invite new possibilities for human association, it can also drive an individual away toward anonymity and dissociation. Was the late Mr. Bell driven into isolation because of the overwhelming and constant nature of propinquity in the city? As much as urban propinquity has been associated with the conviviality of human closeness, this same urban propinquity
can also pave the way toward desperate isolation and silent suffering in the city.

But the harder question—and one pertaining to the moral dimensions of propinquity—that surfaces from Bell’s demise is this: how ought one balance between a respect for privacy and the need for civic empathy—so that the likelihood of such silent and lonely deaths is also minimized? In other words, what ought to be the urban ethics regulating respectful intrusiveness, if any? One possible response may align with what Tonkiss (2003) has referred to as the “ethics of indifference,” which suggests a toleration of an indifference to matters of identity and human relatability, and also normalizes a civilized dissociation from other people in the city. While this ethics offers “the margin” (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 28), where people can find the room to wait, observe, and then decide on how to respond to strangers and their predicaments in the city, however this ethics may be insufficient if people want to anticipate the needs of the unfamiliar others. If the ethics of indifference excels in defining the right to be left alone in a city of other nearby strangers, then at the same time, this ethics has to deny that immediate empathy that can detect and address the acute needs of these unfamiliar others. This room, or the “margin” of waiting, observing, and exhibiting “wariness” (Painter, 2012, p. 524) toward the stranger may just be the very lapse that could precipitate an irreversible alienation or introversion on the part of this stranger.

Beyond these possibilities, spatial propinquity, in the context of dense cities, has also been recognized as a catalytic factor in the transmission of highly infectious diseases. The case of Amoy Gardens in Hong Kong SAR, which is an apartment complex with 17,000 inhabitants, documented how Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was transmitted within a dense built environment via air shafts, plumbing systems, floor drains, and the multi-zone airflow between apartments in the complex (Wolf, 2016, p. 964). According to Wolf (2016, p. 964), the “building itself” appears to have facilitated the spread of the virus, which caused forty-two deaths and infected 321 people. Disease transmission during epidemics usually occurs across very short distances of about three feet or less (McKinney, Gong, & Lewis, 2006, p. 28). But in this case, a confluence of physical environmental factors—toilet
flushing in closely packed apartment blocks, exhaust fans, and ventilation shafts—all propelled aerosolized viral-laden droplets several hundreds of feet through air to cause human infection (McKinney et al., 2006). Inexorably, the case of the Amoy Gardens has not only prompted new considerations in the design of dense built environment in view of highly contagious diseases, but has also irreversibly transformed the etiquettes and lives in spatial propinquity especially in dense cities.

In all, propinquity suggests more than just physical proximity; instead, propinquity can first prime, and then change, human relations in significant ways. Despite this recognition, urban propinquity has however been evaluated—and valued—mostly for its contribution to economic benefits, especially in the form of positive externalities that can result from urban proximity and density (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 297). Such benefits are often thought to be attained through some kind of agglomeration effects that produce economic gains when many people and businesses operate in close proximity (OECD, 2015, p. 26), or else are indirectly accrued through some form of the “Medici Effect” (Johansson, 2006) that permits diverse people to learn from each other, build social and intellectual capital, and then produce wholly new ideas and innovations. This framing of what propinquity could do has led to the creation of innovation spaces in many cities around the world, where different global talents mingle and work in close proximity designed to spur new ideas (see Wagner & Watch, 2017).

But in narrowly framing propinquity this way, other morally significant implications of propinquity in the city have been missed. One of these implications is how spatial propinquity, especially through the design of the built environment, can engender certain people as neighbors, while marking others out as strangers. In turn, this distinction—at least by “the ethics of proximity” (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008)—can lead to the preferential or partial treatment of neighbors at the expense of strangers, which may be less than morally justifiable. These moral pitfalls of propinquity are especially critical in what Berry (2014, p. 14) refers to as the “moral basis of urbanity,” which is concerned with forging a sense of shared purposes and common identity, beyond shared
interests, that can permit diverse people to flourish together in a city. In a milieu marked by an unprecedented urban fragmentation and the corresponding need to generate collaboration among strangers in the city (Ignatieff, 2017, p. 51), the moral pitfalls, as well as the ethical prospect of propinquity, can no longer be ignored. Because propinquity can change human relationships by designating certain people as neighbors while marking others as strangers, and because there is a tendency to treat neighbors differently relative to the strangers, the ethical implications of propinquity are anticipated to be relevant in every culturally diverse city today.

The Ethics of Proximity and Moral Distance

To better specify both the moral pitfalls and the ethical promise of propinquity, it is important here to discuss what has been referred to as “the ethics of proximity.” This ethics revolves around different perspectives that take proximity as an integral factor in normative ethical considerations (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008, p. 156). One version of this ethics, which also has been reformulated as a debate here, revolves around an “impartialist” argument on why we ought not to treat neighbors and strangers differently, and conversely, a “partialist” argument on articulating why we might tend to treat either the neighbor or the stranger differently (see Reader, 2003). Each side of this debate has important implications for the city and will be examined in greater detail later. And integral to this debate are the following three assumptions. Firstly, that physical distance has an effect on moral distance, defined as, “the emotional closeness...between agent and beneficiary” (Abelson, 2005, p. 35). Secondly, neighbors are defined as people who live nearby, and strangers are defined as people relatively farther away in terms of both spatial and relational propinquity. And finally, the respective status of neighbors and strangers is assumed to be stable and invariant. These are important starting points for the ethics of proximity. But as later arguments suggest, the urban condition confounds these assumptions. In turn, this demands a modified ethics of proximity that subsequent discussions will attempt to describe.
In moral philosophy, proximity as propinquity has been argued to have some form of normative significance (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008, p. 159). Along this line of thinking, propinquity has been taken as the basis for preferential treatment of certain others close to us, against an oppositional line of thinking that suggests we ought to treat everyone fairly and impartially. This polarizing debate on the ethics of proximity has profound implications for the city. For example, cosmopolitan cities today have a special onus to attract, and then bring together, strangers (Yeo, Ho, & Heng, 2016). But despite aspirations for cosmopolitanism, people have been observed to live with strangers only by living apart from them (Ignatieff, 2017, p. 43). Instead, people who share common origins or cultures tend to cluster together with the implication that only people who belong in our in-group deserve the preferential treatment reserved for neighbors. On this, evidence suggests that not only are we morally motivated to help those who are nearby because of the way evolutionary forces have shaped our moral psychology (Greene, 2014), but also that this moral motivation can be diluted, if not utterly “deadened,” by geographical distances (Glover, 2012, p. 254).

If so, then these findings from moral psychology compound the urban reality of clustered fragmentation: clustering reinforces the partiality suggested by the ethics of proximity, and strangers who then live apart worsens any moral prospect for impartiality deemed critical to cosmopolitan aspirations. In other words, neighbors have a tendency to remain neighbors, and strangers are likely to remain strangers—the chance for interaction, which is also an opportunity for strangers to enjoy the treatment that neighbors receive, is small. The moral forces of propinquity then appear to pull in the opposite direction from the ethics of cosmopolitanism even when the former ought to reinforce the latter.

Nevertheless, the modern debate on the ethics of proximity was initiated by philosopher Peter Singer’s (1972) influential paper, titled, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” where he argues that “the interests of strangers, near and far, should count as much as those of friends and neighbors” (Chatterjee, 2003, p. 327). Singer (1972, p. 231) argues that the same principle that obliges us to save a drowning child nearby is
the same as saving a starving stranger far away; proximity, or distance, should have no compelling moral force on our actions. While Singer concedes that physical proximity does make it more likely for us to assist someone who needs help, this proximity is irrelevant, morally speaking, for motivating us to help a nearby person over another who is further away. In other words, the moral force of addressing an obligating need is independent of physical distance (Reader, 2003, p. 367).

This argument was later galvanized by the view that everyone lives in a globalized, “one world” (Singer, 2004), where someone, who might need help far away, has become nearer because of globalization. After all, in an interconnected global village, someone else’s cry for help far away may soon become one’s own problem (Singer, 2004, p. 7). In describing the globalized village this way, Singer (2004) comes close to describing the “Anthropocene reality” (Purdy, 2015, p. 265)—for instance, how one common biosphere is being damaged from disparate locations; or conversely, how the global economy could be devastated by the shockwaves from the singular event of the subprime mortgage crisis; or even how civil unrests in Africa and in the Middle East could lead to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis of refugees and immigrants flooding into Europe. These realities support Singer’s (1972) original argument that physical distance is irrelevant when considering on how we ought to respond to those who need help—only if because there is no longer such a thing as a far away problem in an interconnected globalized world.

While Singer’s argument is certainly compelling, the opposing argument is no less convincing. This opposing argument claims that those who are more proximate can expect partial treatment relative to more distant strangers. Especially parents, children, siblings, friends, and colleagues—all who maintain some form of “relational properties” (Reader, 2003, p. 370) with us on top of spatial propinquity—ought to expect a claim of a special moral status for “differential treatment” (Scheffler, 2002, p. 122). This argument suggests that not only is physical distance significant for moral reasoning, but also that vital relationships (e.g., a parent–child relationship, or the working relationship between close colleagues) have to presume special attention that in turn is likely to lead to a closer physical distance between people.
This argument for partiality because of proximity could be defended based on the following three reasons. Firstly, traditional wisdom practices and literature appear to reinforce this argument. Consider, for instance, “Thine own friend, and thy father’s friend, forsake not; neither go into thy brother’s house in the day of thy calamity: for better is a neighbor that is near than a brother far off” (Proverbs 27:10, King James Version), or a similar traditional Chinese proverb, “a far-off relative is not to be preferred to a nearby neighbor.” In this way, these wisdom traditions suggest that the proximate neighbor, rather than a faraway kin, has been perceived as the better bet in times of trouble. To cultivate a sufficiently strong neighborly relation that one can call on during a time of need, one also has “to store meat in the belly of one’s neighbor,” which is a way of investing in the future (Bresnihan, 2016, p. 102). Investing in the future this way then means cultivating a sufficiently robust neighborly relation with the more proximate neighbor, who gets to claim a partial treatment if only because he is also that nearby source of help during a time of need. Spatial proximity, it appears, has its practical advantages. These advantages, in turn, translate into the likelihood of partial treatment.

Secondly, evidence from moral psychology suggests that emotional affect is central to moral concern and responsibility (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008). This emotional affect is also strongly moderated by empathy, and distance appears to weaken empathy (Greene, 2014). And in parallel from moral philosophy, the intersubjective relation, or the “I-You” relation according to Scruton (2017, p. 51), has been deemed as the essential kernel in every aspect of the moral life. This “I-You” relation is strengthened and made more vivid through the exercise of empathy based on what Logstrup (2007, p. 145) refers to as the imaginative “changing of roles,” which is surely facilitated by a closer—rather than a farther—distance between people. In other words, spatial propinquity in the form of a direct face-to-face encounter activates empathy and also our moral faculties in ways that farther distance can only undermine. In converging these two parallel insights from moral psychology and moral philosophy, they constitute a strong reason for why people tend to tune into the needs of those nearer rather than those farther away.

Thirdly, common sense suggests that we have special responsibilities to our families, friends, and communities, where their unequal
treatment, relative to others, forms the basis of these relationships (Scheffler, 2002). In other words, these individuals have a claim on us that others do not have, and that this claim is already a reason to help them in their hour of need (Scruton, 2017). Furthermore, privileging differential treatment to those on the basis of these special relationships does not need to compete with one’s egalitarian outlook; or conversely, to concede to certain obligations toward the stranger is not to demand that they share the “same grip” as the obligations toward our nearest and dearest (Appiah, 2006, p. 158). Loving one’s child, for example, does not necessarily entail a neglect to donate to Oxfam or to displace one’s duty to volunteer at the refugees’ help center. On this, there is no need to assume that partial obligations would come to threaten impartial ones (Reader, 2003, p. 370). Based on these reasons, there is support to slant the ethics of proximity toward favoring more proximate people rather than more distant ones—if only because the differential treatment of those nearest (and dear) to us does not compete in any real sense with many cosmopolitan notions of obligation toward the needy stranger.

While the moral tension between these two arguments on the ethics of proximity is clear, this debate however is inconclusive (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008). Inconclusiveness aside, evidence from moral psychology nonetheless suggests that physical distance can impact moral distance, which in turn affects empathy. This reality is grounded in the way our moral psychology has been evolved to grant differential treatment to those nearby—and those nearby in evolutionary history have tended to comprise of people who were kin, or who were the most likely sources of help during a time of need. Even so, this reality neither explains why people are sometimes motivated to help nearby strangers (Greene, 2014), nor why certain individuals are motivated to help complete strangers beyond the point of either undermining or obliterating themselves (MacFarquhar, 2016). These counter-realities then suggest that Singer’s argument has traction and remains current—and has yet to be overwhelmed by the sheer force of evidence from moral psychology. And because of this, there is a reason to think that some overlapping common ground can exist between the two sides of the debate on the ethics of proximity.
How Does the City Confound the Ethics of Proximity?

The ethics of proximity then offers a preliminary starting point to understand the moral implications of propinquity today. Especially in cities wrestling with the open question of equitable distribution of urban resources—and not least because of the massive influx of strangers today—the ethics of proximity then informs questions of resource allocation: how should resources be allocated? Should resources be disproportionately distributed among those who are considered neighbors? Or should resources be shared equally among all? And what is the ethical justification in each option?

In the absence of this ethics, one can only expect the distribution of any scarce urban resource to conform to the dictates of a belligerent politics of difference. This politics could be summed up as, “the desire for the logic of order and identity… ‘We’ must secure our centrality, and ‘they’ who upset our homely space must be pushed out from the centre” (Sandercock, 2000, p. 205). Against this intransigent politics of “us versus them” that has threatened much of cosmopolitanism in cities today, the ethics of proximity then challenges the hegemonic politics of difference: if propinquity can oblige a difference in ethical treatment, and if these strangers are now considered as proximate individuals (see Bauman, 2016), then they ought to deserve an allocation of resources just like our neighbors even as they remain strangers near us in the city.

But while philosophy may enlighten and inspire the city, the city has however time and again, interdicted philosophy. If the ethics of proximity then prescribes an obligation to the stranger in the abovementioned way, then to what extent is this obligation bounded, or even “infinite,” as Levinas (2006) might suggest? The ethics of proximity, prima facie, does not indicate any limit, while limits not only define the city administratively, but also materially. If so, then to what extent is one obligated to help a nearby stranger? And because utilitarianism does not presuppose any indication of self-limitation, but because urban resources are usually limited or even scarce, relying on Singer’s frame in the city then is likely to mean an eventual confrontation with these different questions of limit: where should a limit be imposed on helping as many as
possible in as many significant ways as possible? Should the limit be imposed on the ultimate number of strangers or newcomers that any one city ought to help? Or should this limit be imposed by the range or quality of help that people would receive? And how should this limit even be defined—is it by the priority of assuaging the most basic needs or is it by the more brutal logic of triage?

In light of these limits, the ethics of proximity is also confounded by the city in another way. Contemporary urban realities can often destabilize the definitions of the nearby neighbor and the distant stranger, which are usually taken to be either stable or invariant categories within the framework of the ethics of proximity. There are at least three different ways that the city could destabilize the notions of neighbors and strangers, and in these ways, also come to confound the ethics of proximity.

Firstly, and as discussed, the spatial design of the built environment is in part responsible for demarcating the neighbor from the stranger on the one hand, and on the other hand, for shaping the relations within any space that neighbors or strangers encounter each other. In other words, depending on how the built environment is shaped or configured, the status of neighbors and strangers could change, or if not, also rendered ambiguous. For example, for cities in China today, a contentious policy has been enforced to remove the walls now separating wealthy gated enclaves from the rest of the community, which resulted in the sharing of once “private” facilities with strangers (see Zheng, 2017). But more to the point here, these strangers are now perceived, though not always accepted, as new neighbors. The physical configuration and structuration of the city can easily render the statuses of neighbor and stranger fluid. In this way, the fluidity of proximate neighbors and more distant strangers then weakens their representational polemics integral in the ethics of proximity.

Secondly, the new strangers today occupy an ambiguous territory between the strict polemics of neighbor and stranger. As Bauman (2016) notes, these new strangers are hardly distant but “at our door.” Whether these strangers are characterized by the dispossessed rural worker, or by the vast number of refugees and migrants fleeing from conflict, violence and poverty, these strangers are among us. This reality ought to behove Kant’s (2006, p. 82) notion of a cosmopolitan right to universal hospitality, which states that because all human beings have the right of
common possession of the surface of the Earth, but because they cannot scatter themselves on the surface of this sphere without limit, they must “ultimately tolerate one another as neighbors.” While this notion has lost none of its moral grip, it has long been disabused by the border fences of nation-states and the different brands of anti-immigration politics. And even if certain barriers have been lowered, and early institutions for some inclusion and integration attempted, these strangers nonetheless occupy an ambiguous territory—quite often and literally, in some form of \textit{terrain vague}—between the status of the distant stranger and the next-door neighbor whenever they settle in cities. The torturous realities of African migrants stuck in the state of limbo along the various edges of the European Union, or the Chinese migrant workers who live amidst an existential precarity where their life-worlds could be all too swiftly bulldozed, all point to how urban complexities can come to unsettle the established distinction between neighbors and strangers.

And thirdly, technology—and especially communicative technologies ubiquitous in the city—has significantly contributed to an “infinite increase in our neighbors” (Imamichi, 2009, p. 12). Specifically, Imamichi asks us to consider an intriguing prospect: a neighbor is a relation that can be established, or revoked, by our technological actions. In other words, it is through the impacts of our actions that we make neighbors out of strangers. According to Imamichi (2009), human actions, when amplified by technology, can now impact or even harm people, who are remote from us. Consider, for instance, the alarming damage incurred through the circulation of fake news—and how these fake news could be generated in one location, but swiftly transmitted by concatenation through any social media platform. Or conversely, where empathy and solidarity with the downtrodden could be shared across national and cultural boundaries through the social media. For these reasons, there is also a need to rethink the question of who is our neighbor today.

**A Modified Ethics of Proximity**

These complications do not nullify the relevance of the ethics of proximity. But they do point to a need to modify this ethics if it is to find greater relevance in the city. What form can this modified ethics of
proximity take? Whichever form this modified ethics of proximity takes, it has to conserve the critical role of propinquity in the ethical encounter, and furthermore, to take into account a more unsettled definition of the neighbor and the stranger in the city. To abolish the dyad of the neighbor and the stranger entirely by converging on the Archimedean point of a shared humanity is neither proper nor applicable for the city; this dyad always exists in some form. Instead, it is more probable that a modified ethics of proximity could be found by abandoning certain entrenched notion of the neighbor made obsolete by the city, and simultaneously, in finding a way to address a notion of the stranger that is more aligned to reality in cities today.

The story of the Good Samaritan is an appropriate intuition pump to begin thinking about how to modify the ethics of proximity in response to the confounding realities of the city (see Luke 10:29–37, King James Version). This story appears to respond, though unevenly, to at least three realities in the city that could confound the ethics of the proximity. Firstly, this story does not presume a stable, or invariant, configuration of the neighbor and the stranger. As a matter of fact, certain interpretations of this story have argued that unsettling the conventional notion of the neighbor was part of the objective of this story (Painter, 2012). Secondly, this presumably hypothetical story, nevertheless unfolds in the depiction of an actual place and event, with their clear and concrete moral demands. Unlike the more abstract philosophy that entails an unbounded obligation to help, the Good Samaritan could only do as much as it was within the practical means of his resources. And finally, the open-endedness of the story does resemble the open-endedness of many ethical encounters between strangers in the city. While the Good Samaritan did hint at the possibility that he would return to check on his charge, no one really knows what happened after he left. On this, the story suggests the counter-intuitive possibility of non-reciprocation when rendering significant help, which is important for any ethics of proximity in the city that takes its beneficiaries as those whom one may most likely not meet again.

This story begins when an expert of the law, upon hearing Jesus of Nazareth preached a commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself, wondered aloud—who then is my neighbor? The exact intention behind asking this question is unclear. Perhaps this expert was hoping
to contradict Jesus: that if everyone could qualify as his neighbor, then no one truly is, and it would become impossible to know any one properly, and much less to love any one of them as himself. Or perhaps this expert was honestly curious on who might this neighbor be, only if because it is often easier to indulge, rather than to love, oneself. Who then, he might have wondered, is deserving of such a morally lofty treatment that would exceed how he is likely to treat himself?

Nevertheless, to answer the expert’s question, Jesus then accounted a story of a hapless traveler, who was first robbed, then gravely beaten, and subsequently left to die on the side of the road. Perhaps in anticipating but also abolishing the expert’s moral assumptions, Jesus accounted how a priest, whom one might expect to render help, passed by without offering any. Then next came a Levite, who was an esteemed person by Jewish tradition consecrated for religious service, also passed by without offering any help. Finally, a Samaritan came along—a person who was dually unlikely to help. Not only was the Samaritan a member of a social caste that this expert could count on least to offer any help, but the Samaritan was also an individual who had most likely suffered contempt from the social caste of this wounded traveler. Despite these social and anthropological expectations, the Samaritan had compassion on the wounded traveler and he helped. The Samaritan rendered first-aid to the wounded traveler immediately, and then he brought this individual on his transport to an inn, where he further took care of him overnight and on the next day, paid the inn-keeper in advance for more needed care. After accounting this story, Jesus then rebounded the original question to the expert: who then, was the neighbor, to that hapless traveler? The expert of the law then answered: the one who had compassion on him.

In this way, the story of the Good Samaritan questions the commonsensical notion of the neighbor; the neighbor is neither one who is affiliated to us by relational propinquity, nor one who is situated nearby in spatial propinquity. Instead, and based on the story, this person could even be the furthest individual one could expect as a neighbor. Radically, this neighbor can be anyone who needs our help, or who heeds our call for help. The neighbor is defined more by moral propinquity rather than by spatial propinquity. But more to the point and in
relation to the city, this story illustrates how an encounter between two strangers could be transformed into a meeting of new neighbors. The pivot of this transformation is compassion, or neighborliness, which defined the Good Samaritan as the neighbor to the hapless traveler. If neighborliness is that transformative moral quality that can bring strangers together in cities today, then what may be the wellspring of this neighborliness?

According to Løgstrup (2007, p. 142), the neighborliness demonstrated by the Good Samaritan was made possible by practicing the “Golden Rule,” which states that one should do what one would have others do himself or herself. While this “Golden Rule” appears to operate on the principle of reciprocation, but in reality, it is in fact predicated on a more imaginative and radical ethic: that one would still help the other person even when this person has done nothing for oneself. In the words of Løgstrup (2007, p. 143), this ethic appeals to our moral imagination: “The charitable acts I might have wished another would do for me, had I been in his position, those acts should I do for him.”

Løgstrup’s exposition of the “Golden Rule” is nothing short of a complete reversal of the principle of reciprocation. According to Løgstrup (2007, p. 143), not only does the “Golden Rule” recognize those who need our help are quite often the people who are not able to give anything back in return, they are also likely people who may never be able to do so. In contrast, the principle of reciprocation is based on the idea that since one has been helped, one must then return the favor; it is an obligation, not an act of imaginative compassion. The principle of reciprocation demonstrates how honoring fairness can often overshadow compassion, or neighborliness. Furthermore, how could one know where, or to whom, to return this favor, unless one is also already in spatial or relational propinquity with the person who first offered help? In this way, the principle of reciprocation has to assume a likely neighborly status that already exists in some form, while the “Golden Rule” does not. Unwittingly, Løgstrup’s version of the “Golden Rule” then may at least stand as a partial answer to a more robust ethic of proximity that can correspond to the complex realities of neighbors and strangers in the city.
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