

are you in the zone?

k.easterling

Fulcrum: *How does neoliberalism manifest itself internationally, in Special Economic Zones, Free Trade Zones, and these types of extrajudicial or extra-national environments? Is it fair to consider these spaces as a global economic infrastructure?*

Keller Easterling: Yes, I think so. What I have found is that this formula for world cities has become a kind of urban paradigm, probably the most highly contagious urban formula in the world right now. It seems that every country wants, and thinks it needs, global financial cities to signal its entry into the global markets. And because these spaces are often jurisdictionally independent from their host nations, it's true they form a kind of global network amongst themselves.

They provide one-stop entry into a foreign country, while also providing a known or expected set of economic incentives. These may include cheap labour, tax holidays, foreign ownership of property permissions, lax labour and environmental regulation, or streamlined customs. While these special Zones were intended to be something that would just jump-start the economies of developing countries, their conditions have now become the expectation — the addiction — for most global companies that operate within them.

F: *Is there something imperialist about the way the West has primarily profited from this structure?*

KE: I'm not so sure I could say that now. It is true that during the post-war period it was definitely a UNIDO-sponsored [United Nations Industrial Development Organisation] format that the West was directing, holding seminars in Shannon and Kaohsiung to teach developing countries how to do this Free Trade Zone thing. It was coming from the West with the rhetoric of relaxation and freedom, neoliberal economic trade, and open doors. It led to exploitation of developing countries. At some point in the 1970s, the UN and the World Bank determined that Zones were sub-optimal economic instruments. They even thought the Zone could be an economic time bomb, but by then it had already been adopted by

China and the Middle East. Over the last 40 years, Zone growth has been accelerating — from just a handful at the mid-century to now thousands and thousands. The form of the Zone has also morphed. It is no longer necessarily authored by the West, or by Washington consensus, or by the UN, or anything like that.

The way the Zone has been used in China and the Middle East is pretty interesting.

It's almost as if Dubai, awakened by oil after centuries of relative poverty, recognised the Zone as a tool of its old entrepôt or pirate culture.

Both China and Dubai made the Zone into a complete city. It's no longer a fenced-in warehouse compound; it's everything. It is a double of the major cities, or perhaps more accurately, it is a way of generating world cities.

F: *One of the terms I've been thinking about a lot recently is 'shadow state'; it's interesting you mention the pirate culture of Dubai, it's almost as if these Zones are the privateers of the twentieth century.*

KE: Yes, that's the way I've been characterising them, as the shadow the state needs, the shadow working for them. Clearly many countries recognise the need for a shadow or doppelgänger to take advantage of different markets. As Zones have been wildly morphing, a lot of countries are now (with a bit of laundering) talking about them as New Towns. Major cities want to have their Zone double for business that needs to be done outside the restrictions of the State, as with Navi Mumbai or New Songdo City, a satellite of Seoul.

F: *How do you situate your own architectural thinking in relation these ideas?*

KE: *Extrastatecraft*, the book I just finished, was all about that. It didn't seem enough to simply write an exposé, or to limit the work to reportage. During the course of my investigation people would ask me the sorts of questions you're asking, and expect me to have answers, strategies — a way to get under the hood.

I have been thinking about this for a long time, beginning perhaps with my work on "spatial products" — the repeatable formulas for making space that are the same anywhere in the world. The Zone is arguably another one

of these spatial products, but scaled up: it's a formula for a city.

I've also been working on altering a habit of mind about design. We might extend the power and reach of our object forms with active forms. Spatial products are examples of active forms — forms that, like a software, organise the components of the field and unfold with time-released powers.

The Zone, for instance, it is an incredible multiplier — it's contagious as a global urban form. And a multiplier is an active form — not a masterplan, but a carrier of some new technology or spatial protocol that acts like a germ within the population of Zones. It's been mutating so wildly in the last 40 years. What alternative politics might it carry?

That's one way to address the question. Another way is simpler still. I've been spreading the rumour that some of the next Zone entrepreneurs are questioning the enclave form. Why should it be an ex-urban form? Why not just map some of the special infrastructures and incentives back onto the city? Instead of taking the premium infrastructure out of the city, from Nairobi to Guadalajara or Moscow, why not return them to the city and thus return more benefit to the domestic economy?

As urbanists we know that the city manifests an environment more robust and productive than the enclave. Given the Zone's ambition to swallow the city, perhaps it is the carrier of its own antidote. I don't mean to say that the incentives of the Zone should replace the workings of the city, but that the city might dissolve some of the intractable lawless aspects of the Zone.

F: *It seems that with every kind of proposition in which you play with these conditions there's always the risk that it produces the exact opposite of the intended action.*

KE: Absolutely, these are all socio-technical networks that change over time. The architect's notion of the masterplan as singular prescription doesn't seem to work here. Protocols with interdependent variables are better at regulating and accommodating change.

F: *Do you consider the city to be the key unit of scale in dealing with these issues?*

KE: I don't know... While it's interesting to think about dissolving some of these enclaves, by mapping the Zone onto the city, they might also dissolve for other reasons.

In Kenya, for instance, the technologies of mobile telephony make the spatial segregation of the Zone redundant. They bring to the more remote town and the village airborne broadband previously available only in the Zone.

F: *Do you think there is a possibility for the architect to invent a new form of agency in this context?*

KE: The object-form for which we have such a good training is hugely important. We're connoisseurs of object, outline, shape, and it can be politically powerful. But in my work I'm also trying to augment the powers of that object-form with active-form of different kinds — remote controls, multipliers, and protocols composed of interdependent spatial variables. The political world could use these kinds of active forms from us, from practitioners who know something about space and urbanity.

Global financiers, consultants, managers, and the like are speaking in the terms of econometrics, informetrics, and other forms of technical languages. But no one is speaking in a language of spatial variables. They're talking in technical formulas that have spatial consequences, but none of them are leading with spatial consequences.

The world could really use from us a type of form making in another register that can be part of the other global protocols that are deciding how our world works.

Our knowledge could be incredibly useful, both our understanding of object-form and active-form, as an art — not a science, but an art.

F: *In your essay for Strelka Press you wrote: "An entrepreneur designs not only the product, but also its passage through a market." I wondered if you could elaborate?*

KE: I teach studios about this, that enjoy these forms of artistry. It's an aesthetic training that is a little closer to that of the theatre. And its artistic seductions and pleasures are so far away from the social science, policy-making, and things that people normally think about when they think of a political architect.

Keller Easterling is professor of architecture at Yale University, an architect, urbanist, and theorist.

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