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To cite this article: Emma Elfversson, Ivan Gusic & Jonathan Rokem (2023): Peace in cities, peace through cities? Theorising and exploring geographies of peace in violently contested cities, *Peacebuilding*, DOI: [10.1080/21647259.2023.2225914](https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2023.2225914)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2023.2225914>



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Published online: 21 Jun 2023.



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Peace in cities, peace through cities? Theorising and exploring geographies of peace in violently contested cities

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ABSTRACT

This special issue explores geographies of peace in violently contested cities – cities where the socio-political order is contested by actors who use violence and repression to either challenge or reinforce the prevailing distribution of power and political, economic, and social control. The articles within the special issue theorise and explore where, when, how, and why urban conflicts manifest themselves in the context of contested cities. Together, they also uncover strategies and mechanisms that can break dynamics of violence and repression, lead to urban coexistence, and generate peaceful relations in cities, grounding their analyses in rich case studies of different violently contested cities. The special issue thereby advances the research front on violently contested cities by studying their previously underexplored constructive potential. Bringing together different disciplinary perspectives, the special issue speaks to broader issues of conflicted and conflict-driven urbanisation, political violence in cities, and wider processes of urban change.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 March 2023
Accepted 13 June 2023

KEYWORDS

Contested cities; urban violence; coexistence; peace; urbanism

Introduction

Numerous research outputs highlight the centrality of cities – as multifarious and distinct interconnected political arenas,¹ as territorial anchors in wider processes of political and economic restructuring,² and as sites where local dynamics of peace and conflict have a wider impact beyond their own fluid urban borders and physical structures.³ Cities shaken by violent contestation – e.g. Medellín (Colombia), Beirut (Lebanon), and Kidal (Mali) – underline these dynamics. When violently contested cities such as these are analysed, the emphasis is frequently on violence along entrenched conflict lines, everyday lives riddled with (economic, social, ontological, and personal) insecurities, and segregated cityscapes. These cities also often suffer from failed reconstruction, reintegration, and reconciliation efforts, depressed economic development, and political entrenchment

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¹Ash Amin, 'Spatialities of Globalisation', *Environment and Planning A* 34, no. 3 (2002): 385–399; and Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-regional Process* (Blackwell, 1989).

²Neil Brenner, *New State Spaces. Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

³Castells, *The Informational City*.

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between antagonists, potentially creating an explosive status quo that risks sending both the city itself and its wider context into a spiral of violence.⁴

Such portrayals are neither inaccurate nor strange, given that the aforementioned dynamics often prevail. Yet what such analyses – whether in media, by involved political or policy actors, or through academic research – do not account for is that there is more to these cities. In addition to highly destructive realities, violently contested cities also hold significant – yet untapped and rarely materialised – constructive potential through which antagonists might find common ground and the cities themselves might become examples of coexistence. The potential to bring people together, develop dynamic political, economic, and social cooperation, and provide inspiration for change is often overshadowed by the destructive realities of violently contested cities. Yet this constructive potential is nevertheless still there – both in theory and practice.

Collectively, this special issue explores the dynamics which utilise this constructive potential to foster peace in the midst of urban contestation. Peace here refers to actions and visions that break away from destructive confrontation and violence, establish new relationships across polarised lines, and enable cooperation that improves everyday lives. This broad conception of peace resonates with the notion of everyday peace – i.e. a grounded understanding of peace that is based on the experience and practices relevant to specific local contexts and the actors who live there.⁵ The specific nature and degree of violence in any given city depends on a mix of attributes including physical size and structure, history, economic development, political power, and governance.⁶ Violence in cities also has not only direct spatial implications at the local level, but it is inhabited at various interconnected political and geographical scales: global, state-wide, regional, and human.⁷ Challenging the oversimplification of urban violence, there is a growing demand to merge urban studies and peace research to generate a more relational and plural analysis of violence in contemporary urban space.⁸ The articles in this special issue uncover interrelated strategies and mechanisms that can break dynamics of violence, lead to urban coexistence, and generate peaceful relations in cities, grounding their analyses in rich case studies of violently contested cities spanning different world regions and geopolitical contexts. Exploring in-depth how this constructive potential works, as well as what hinders and facilitates it, is the principal aim of this special issue.

This introductory article is structured as follows. It begins by situating the special issue in wider scholarly debates and outlining central research gaps. It then moves on to some collective theoretical points of departure, before identifying key theoretical and empirical insights from the collection of individual articles. The article concludes by summarising how the special issue advances the research front on violently contested cities and on urban peace and conflict more widely.

⁴See e.g. Hiba Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come* (Stanford University Press, 2018); and Ivan Gusic, *Contesting Peace in the Postwar City: Belfast, Mitrovica and Mostar* (Palgrave, 2019).

⁵Helen Berents, 'An Embodied Everyday Peace in the Midst of Violence', *Peacebuilding* 3, no. 2 (2015): 1–14; and Roger Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace: How So-called Ordinary People can Disrupt Violent Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶Emma Elfversson, Ivan Gusic and Brendan Murtagh, 'Postwar Cities: Conceptualizing and Mapping the Research Agenda', *Political Geography* 105 (2023); and Ronald van Kempen, 'Divided Cities in the 21st Century: Challenging the Importance of Globalisation', *Journal of Housing and Built Environment* 22 (2007): 13–31.

⁷Jonathan Rokem and Camillo Boano, 'Towards a Global Urban Geopolitics: Inhabiting Violence', *Geopolitics* (2023), doi: 10.1080/14650045.2023.2212249.

⁸Andrea Pavoni and Simone Tulumello, 'What is Urban Violence?' *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 1 (2020): 49–76.

Violently contested cities in urban peace and conflict

The starting point of this special issue are the inherent ambiguities of violently contested cities – which we understand as cities where socio-political order is contested by actors who use violence and repression to challenge or reinforce the prevailing distribution of power and political, economic, and social control.⁹ Violently contested cities are often embedded in war-torn contexts. Examples include Jerusalem (Israel-Palestine), Beirut (Lebanon), Kidal, Gao, and Mopti (Mali), and Medellín (Colombia), all of which are addressed in this special issue. Other cities are violently contested despite the absence of recent domestic warfare. Such examples, also studied here, include Manama (Bahrain) – a city which has experienced ethno-sectarian protests and repression connected to the monarchy’s statebuilding project¹⁰ – and Grenoble (France) – where residents have borne the brunt of a ‘war on crime/terror’ and police brutality has triggered violent protests.¹¹

Violently contested cities are often unstable flashpoints where antagonists clash and focal points of repressive measures, something which tends to make them dysfunctional or divided as urban governance systems as well as potential breeding grounds of conflict and unrest extending beyond the city borders across multiple scales.¹² Beirut attracts high levels of violence between the previously warring parties in Lebanon,¹³ Medellín features fractured governance where city institutions compete with criminal organisations over control of the city,¹⁴ while Jerusalem’s future status constitutes a seemingly impassable obstacle in a two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁵ Violent contestation tends to have detrimental effects on everyday safety and livelihood, practices of urban coexistence, and economic development. In Jerusalem, urban violence has been unstable yet ever-present, contributing to a divided geography of fear, in which many Jewish residents avoid entering Palestinian neighbourhoods, and Palestinian residents reduce their presence in Jewish areas during violent periods to a minimum.¹⁶

Yet in addition to having destructive consequences and playing conflict-generating roles, violently contested cities are simultaneously sites of creativity, mixing, accommodation, experimenting, and diverse forms of mobility and connectivity between people

⁹Jon Calame and Esther Ruth Charlesworth, *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Emma Elfverson, Ivan Gusic, and Kristine Höglund, *The Spatiality of Violence in Post-War Cities* (London: Routledge, 2020); Gusic, *Contesting Peace*; Ivan Gusic, ‘Divided Cities’, in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies*, eds. Oliver Richmond and Gëzim Visoka (Palgrave, 2020); Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen, eds., *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance* (Columbia University Press, 2020); and Jonathan Rokem and Camillo Boano, eds., *Urban Geopolitics: Rethinking Planning in Contested Cities* (Routledge, 2018).

¹⁰See Mabon and Nagle in this special issue.

¹¹See Djikema and Mouafo in this special issue.

¹²Kaldor and Sassen, eds., *Cities at War*; Wendy Pullan and Britt Baillie, eds., *Locating Urban Conflicts: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Everyday* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Achim Wennmann and Oliver Jütersonke, eds., *Urban Safety and Peacebuilding: New Perspectives on Sustaining Peace in the City* (Routledge, 2019).

¹³Akar, *For the War*; Sara Fregonese, *War and the City: Urban Geopolitics in Lebanon* (I.B. Tauris, 2020); see also Smaira and Gunning and Mabon and Nagle in this special issue.

¹⁴Enrique Desmond Arias, ‘Social Responses to Criminal Governance in Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Kingston, and Medellín’, *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 1 (2019): 165–180; Alexandra Abello-Colak and Valeria Guarneros-Meza, ‘The Role of Criminal Actors in Local Governance’, *Urban Studies* 51, no. 15 (2014): 3268–3289; see also Hoelscher & Harboe in this special issue.

¹⁵Scott A. Bollens, *Trajectories of Conflict and Peace: Jerusalem and Belfast since 1994* (Taylor and Francis, 2018); see also Lehrs et al. in this special issue.

¹⁶Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Everyday Agency and Transformation: Place, Body and Story in the Divided City’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 131–148; and Marik Shtern and Jonathan Rokem, ‘Towards Urban Geopolitics of Encounter: Spatial Mixing in Contested Jerusalem’, *Geopolitics* (2021): 1–25.

and ideas, in trade and culture, across ideologies and religions.¹⁷ These dynamics give cities such as Beirut, Medellín, and Grenoble a constructive potential which can lead to improved relations or even reconciliation between antagonists, shared socio-political rule permeated by cooperation and interdependence, and new ways of dealing with conflict and incompatibilities non-violently. Violently contested cities can thus also be arenas for constructive outcomes and conflict-transformative dynamics.¹⁸ Exploring and theorising this constructive potential is the common thread across the articles in this special issue.

This focus is motivated by the substantial need for both theoretical and empirical knowledge about the role violently contested cities play in both peace and conflict. Recent scholarship points to major shifts in global and local geopolitics giving cities an increasingly central role.¹⁹ Research has highlighted the urbanisation of warfare,²⁰ the surge of violent events in several of the world's major cities,²¹ and the role of violently contested cities as both urban frontlines in major conflicts²² and stumbling-blocks in wider peace processes.²³ These dynamics underline that cities occupy central roles in conflict-affected societies across the globe, and suggest that this centrality will only continue to increase in an ever-urbanising world.²⁴ Understanding how urban violence, repression, and marginalisation can be prevented and managed, as well as how urban coexistence and peaceful relations in cities can be achieved, will thus be of utmost importance in the decades to come – not only for everyday life of residents in the cities per se, but also for peace and stability in their wider contexts.²⁵ As noted by Cockayne, Bosetti, and Hussain: ‘the future of violent conflict is urban – because the future of humanity is urban. If we want to prevent future violent conflict, we must prevent violent urban conflict’.²⁶

¹⁷Giulia Carabelli, *The Divided City and the Grassroots: The (Un)making of Ethnic Divisions in Mostar* (Springer, 2018); and Jonathan Rokem, ‘Beyond Incommensurability: Jerusalem from an Ordinary Cities Perspective’, *City* 20, no. 3 (2016): 451–61.

¹⁸Annika Björkdahl, ‘Urban Peacebuilding’, *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 2 (2013): 207–221; Silvia Danielak, ‘Conflict Urbanism: Reflections on the Role of Conflict and Peacebuilding in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg’, *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 4, (2020): 447–459; Ivan Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)? Urban Peace and the Coexistence of Antagonists in City Spaces’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 5 (2022): 619–640; and Gruia Bădescu, ‘The City as a World in Common: Syncretic Place-making as a Spatial Approach to Peace’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 5 (2022): 600–618.

¹⁹Peter Marcuse and Ronald Van Kempen, eds., *Of States and Cities: The Partitioning of Urban Space* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Rokem and Boano, *Urban Geopolitics*; Kaldor and Sassen, *Cities at War*; and AbdouMaliq Simone, ‘Cities of the Global South’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 46 (2020): 603–622.

²⁰Stephen Graham, *Cities under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (Verso, 2011); and Wennmann and Jütersonke, *Urban Safety and Peacebuilding*.

²¹Marco Allegra, Anna Casaglia, and Jonathan Rokem, ‘The Political Geographies of Urban Polarisation: A Critical Review of Research on Divided Cities’, *Geography Compass* 6, no. 9 (2012): 560–574; Emma Elfversson and Kristine Höglund, ‘Are Armed Conflicts Becoming more Urban?’, *Cities* 119 (2021): 103356; Sara Fregonese and Sunčana Laketa, ‘Urban Atmospheres of Terror’, *Political Geography* 96 (2022): 102569; and Antônio Sampaio, ‘Before and After Urban Warfare: Conflict Prevention and Transitions in Cities’, *International Review of the Red Cross* 98, no. 901 (2016): 71–95.

²²Akar, *For the War*; Fregonese, *War and the City*; and Wendy Pullan, ‘Frontier Urbanism: The Periphery at the Centre of Contested Cities’, *The Journal of Architecture* 16, no. 1 (2011): 15–35.

²³Calame and Charlesworth, *Divided Cities*; Pullan and Baillie, *Locating Urban Conflicts*; and Gusic, *Contesting Peace*.

²⁴Neil Brenner, *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (Jovis, 2014); Kaldor and Sassen, *Cities at War*; Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Sage, 2018); and Wennmann and Jütersonke, *Urban Safety and Peacebuilding*.

²⁵Karen E. Till, ‘Wounded Cities: Memory-work and a Place-based Ethics of Care’, *Political Geography* 31, no. 1 (2012): 3–14.

²⁶James Cockayne, Louise Bosetti, and Nazia Hussain, ‘Preventing Urban Conflict: A Thematic Paper for the United Nations-World Bank Study on Conflict Prevention’, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, *Conflict Prevention Series*, no. 2 (2017).

Our special issue recognises this need and therefore seeks to contribute to the growing literature on violently contested cities and urban peacebuilding.²⁷ It particularly seeks to address the research gaps which exist on the *constructive* potential of these cities. Research on violently contested cities from within political geography,²⁸ peace and conflict studies,²⁹ anthropology,³⁰ urban studies,³¹ and planning³² has advanced our knowledge on the challenges experienced in violently contested cities. However, this research has almost exclusively focused on how these urban areas became violently contested, the destructive consequences and conflict-generating roles their contestation has, and why different efforts to generate coexistence in them have failed. These studies have uncovered how urban residents end up as ‘intimate enemies’,³³ how their cityscapes are built apart through defensive architecture,³⁴ how their spatial layout reinforces contestation,³⁵ how they both attract and generate violence,³⁶ and how their politics tends to become entrenched.³⁷ Whilst important, this focus on destructive dynamics has resulted in far fewer studies on the constructive peacebuilding potential of these cities.³⁸ As a result, we have limited in-depth knowledge on what dynamics are at work when citizens are reconciled, when shared socio-political rule emerges, and when new forms of coexistence are discovered.³⁹ Our focus on theorising and exploring how and why violently contested cities are able to play constructive roles therefore makes this special issue a novel endeavour into sparsely explored academic terrain.

²⁷See e.g. Björkdahl, ‘Urban Peacebuilding’; Scott A. Bollens, *City and Soul in Divided Societies* (Routledge, 2012); Calame and Charlesworth, *Divided Cities*; Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)?’; Kristin Ljungkvist and Anna Jarstad, ‘Revisiting the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: Through the Emerging Urban Approach’, *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 10 (2021): 2209–2226; and Kaldor and Sassen, *Cities at War*.

²⁸Sara Fregonese, ‘Beyond the “Weak State”: Hybrid Sovereignties in Beirut’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no. 4 (2012): 655–674; Sara Fregonese, ‘Shockwaves: Atmospheres Beyond the Conflict City/Ordinary City Divide’, *Conflict and Society* 7, no. 1 (2021): 26–41; Jonathan Rokem, Chagai M. Weiss, and Dan Miodownik, ‘Geographies of Violence in Jerusalem: The Spatial Logic of Urban Intergroup Conflict’, *Political Geography* 66 (2018): 88–97; and Jonathan Rokem, Sara Fregonese, Adam Ramadan, Elisa Pascucci, Gilad Rosen, Igal Charney, Till Paasche, and James D. Sidaway, ‘Interventions in Urban Geopolitics’, *Political Geography* 61 (2017): 253–262.

²⁹Annika Björkdahl and Ivan Gusic, ‘The Divided City: A Space for Frictional Peacebuilding’, *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 3 (2013): 317–333; Elfversson, Gusic, and Höglund, *The Spatiality of Violence*; Emma Elfversson and Kristine Höglund, ‘Violence in the City that Belongs to No-one: Urban Distinctiveness and Interconnected Insecurities in Nairobi (Kenya)’, *Conflict, Security & Development* 19, no. 4 (2019): 347–370; Elfversson and Höglund, ‘Are Armed Conflicts?’; Gusic, *Contesting Peace*; Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Everyday Agency and Transformation’; and Lisa Strömbom, ‘Counter-conduct in Divided Cities: Resisting Urban Planning Practices in Jerusalem’, *Peacebuilding* 5, no. 3 (2017): 239–254.

³⁰Azra Hromadžić, ‘Uninvited Citizens: Violence, Spatiality and Urban Ruination in Post-war and Postsocialist Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 4, no. 2–3 (2019): 114–136.

³¹Bollens, *Trajectories of Conflict and Peace*; Bollens, *City and Soul*; Scott A. Bollens, *Bordered Cities and Divided Societies: Humanistic Essays of Conflict, Violence, and Healing* (Routledge, 2021); and Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City* (Pluto, 2006).

³²Akar, *For the War*; Frank Gaffikin and Mike Morrissey, *Planning in Divided Cities: Collaborative Shaping of Contested Space*, (Wiley-Blackwell Publisher, 2011); and Joel Kotek, ‘Divided Cities in a European Cultural Context’, *Progress in Planning*, 52 (1999): 227–237.

³³Scott A. Bollens, *Urban Peace-building in Divided Societies: Belfast and Johannesburg* (Westview Press, 1999).

³⁴Calame and Charlesworth, *Divided Cities*; Gusic, *Contesting Peace*; and Gusic, Ivan, ‘The Relational Spatiality of the Post-war Condition: A Study of the City of Mitrovica’, *Political Geography* 71 (2019): 47–55.

³⁵Rokem and Boano, *Urban Geopolitics*.

³⁶Fregonese, *War and the City*; and Gaffikin and Morrissey, *Planning in Divided Cities*.

³⁷Akar, *For the War*; Gusic, *Contesting Peace*; and Pullan and Baillie, *Locating Urban Conflicts*.

³⁸Important exceptions include Björkdahl, ‘Urban Peacebuilding’; Carabelli, *The Divided City*; Danielak, ‘Conflict Urbanism’; Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)?’; and Jonathan Rokem, ‘Introduction: Learning from Jerusalem: Rethinking Urban Conflicts in the 21st Century’, *City* 20, no. 3 (2016): 400–04. These authors have theorised the constructive potential of violently contested cities and/or explored its empirical materialisations. Yet these efforts are best described as initial steps towards understanding the constructive potential of violently contested cities, generating initial insights to be explored in further research.

³⁹See Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)?’.

The articles in this special issue make important theoretical and empirical contributions by theorising the constructive potential of violently contested cities and exploring how urban actors are able to harness this potential through different strategies that make everyday life safer and improve the city's internal and external functioning. The broader relevance of such insights is high given that these cities also tend to be central in their wider contexts (regions, states, and continents),⁴⁰ meaning that their constructive potential is not limited to urban life but can improve the wider geopolitical contexts of these cities as well. Without denying that the long-term stability of Jerusalem or Mostar is dependent on the general state of affairs in Israel-Palestine or Bosnia-Herzegovina, we thus argue that positive changes in, or learning constructive ideas from, these violently contested cities might affect the trajectories of their wider contexts.

We also make contributions to the wider everyday peace literature as well as the literature within urban studies that focuses on urban coexistence. The everyday peace literature has emerged from widespread critique in the last decades towards different mainstream approaches – within practice, policy, and academia – aimed either at facilitating or understanding how peace and coexistence is generated.⁴¹ The critique levelled at these approaches is that they understand peace as an inherently universal and objective concept, concern themselves with abstract matters without paying much (if any) attention to the realities of societies transitioning from war, and envision peace to be implemented through technical top-down processes.⁴² In contrast, the collective argument within the everyday peace literature is that peace is a contextually bound and therefore plural and subjective concept, whose materialisation is highly concrete and reached through messy and mundane but inherently political processes between those who have to live the generated peace.⁴³ Consequently, to understand how peace is built and coexistence generated, we must study the different contexts and the political, economic, and social everyday processes through which these concrete forms of peace and coexistence materialise.⁴⁴ This special issue contributes to this literature through the analysis of how messy, dynamic, complex, creative, and informal urban processes generate different forms of coexistence in violently contested cities.

The literature on urban coexistence in turn recognises the challenges inherent in urban dynamics and analyses how diverse groups and interests can coexist in the city without generating destructive outcomes. Cities bring together a multitude of groups, ideologies, political organisations, economic interests, and cultural expressions, which by

⁴⁰Indeed, this centrality is often why these cities are violently contested to begin with (see Gusic, 'Divided cities').

⁴¹Oliver Richmond, *Peace in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁴²Wolfgang Dietrich, *Interpretations of Peace in History and Culture* (Palgrave, 2012); Florian Kühn, 'The Peace Prefix: Ambiguities of the Word "Peace"', *International Peacekeeping* 19, no. 4 (2012): 396–409; Roger Mac Ginty, 'Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and Local Agency in Conflict-affected Societies', *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 6 (2014): 548–564; Elisa Randazzo, *Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding: A Critical Exploration of the Local Turn* (Routledge, 2017); Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique* (Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017); and Tarja Väyrynen, *Corporeal Peacebuilding: Mundane Bodies and Temporal Transitions* (Palgrave, 2019).

⁴³Mac Ginty, 'Everyday Peace', 553; see also Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace*; Berents, 'An Embodied Everyday Peace'; Martin Lundqvist, 'Post-war Memorialisation as Everyday Peace? Exploring Everyday (dis-) Engagements with the Maoist Martyrs' Gate of Beni Bazaar in Nepal', *Conflict, Security & Development* 19, no. 5 (2019): 475–496; Branka Marijan, 'The Politics of Everyday Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Ireland', *Peacebuilding* 5, no. 1 (2017): 67–81; and Anthony Ware, and Vicki-Ann Ware, 'Everyday peace: Rethinking Typologies of Social Practice and Local Agency', *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 3 (2022): 222–241.

⁴⁴Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace*; Achim Wennmann, John Collins, and Tuesday Reitano, 'Illicit Economies and Urban Peace: Introduction to the Special Issue', *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* 2, no. 2 (2021): 72–79.

definition are engaged in conflicts in dense and interconnected urban spaces.⁴⁵ Alongside current and future urbanisation trajectories that imply an ever-urbanising global population, this literature stresses additional trends that underline the importance of understanding how urban coexistence can be achieved. One is that global patterns of migration, connectivity, and economic networks are turning cities more diverse than ever before, thereby intensifying the challenges of urban coexistence.⁴⁶ At the same time, contemporary and future threats from climate change and global health crises bring particular urban challenges and risk destabilising cities.⁴⁷ We argue that the insights from this special issue also advances our knowledge on urban coexistence per se. On the one hand, problems found in violently contested cities are often similar to those found in all cities. While amplified by the conflict setting, the nature of these problems – e.g. segregation, political entrenchment, competition over resources, ethnic and religious frictions, and social and spatial inequality – does often not differ that much between these cities and more ‘ordinary’ cities.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the setting of violent contestation makes these cities ‘least likely cases’ of urban coexistence. While this makes their problems qualitatively different, we also argue that whatever solutions generate coexistence in these cities are likely to be relevant in cities without overarching violent contestation.

Theoretical points of departure: drivers of peace in violently contested cities

Violent contestation tends to have extensive detrimental effects on people’s safety and livelihoods, practices of urban coexistence, political stability, and economic development. Yet such destructive realities are only part of the story. Because of their urban dynamics, violently contested cities also hold a constructive potential to bring people together into improved and reconciled relations, to create shared and mutually accepted socio-political orders, and to discover new ways of dealing with conflict non-violently.⁴⁹ This constructive potential stems from the constitution and functioning of cities – i.e. from how cities are composed and lived.⁵⁰ Cities are often theorised as heterogeneous, dense, as well as open and permeable socio-political entities which function through unavoidable mixing and diversity. Heterogeneity means that cities hold numerous elements which are simultaneously stable and fluid, competing and cooperating, reinforcing and undermining each other, interacting

⁴⁵Ash Amin, *Land of Strangers* (Polity, 2012); Stijn Oosterlynck, Gert Verschraegen, and Ronald van Kempen, eds., *Divercities: Understanding Super-diversity in Deprived and Mixed Neighbourhoods* (Policy Press, 2018); Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (Yale University Press, 2012); George Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, in *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and Nigel Thrift, ‘But Malice Aforethought: Cities and the Natural History of Hatred’. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30, no. 2 (2005): 133–150.

⁴⁶Oosterlynck et al., *Divercities*.

⁴⁷Harriet Bulkeley, *Cities and Climate Change* (Routledge, 2013); Patrick Brandful Cobbinah, Michael Odei, Erdiaw-Kwasie, and Paul Amoateng, ‘Africa’s Urbanisation: Implications for Sustainable Development’, *Cities* 47 (2015): 62–72; Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (Allen Lane, 2005); and Lina Martínez and John Rennie Short, ‘The Pandemic City: Urban Issues in the Time of COVID–19’, *Sustainability* 13, no. 6 (2021): 3295.

⁴⁸Gusic, *Contesting Peace*; Rokem, ‘Beyond Incommensurability’. See Djikema and Mouafo in this special issue for a challenge to the distinction between violently contested and ‘normal’ cities.

⁴⁹See e.g. Gusic, ‘Peace between peace(s)?’; Kaldor and Sassen, *Cities at War*; Dylan O’Driscoll, ‘Everyday Peace and Conflict: (Un)privileged Interactions in Kirkuk, Iraq’, *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 10 (2021): 2227–2246; and Wennmann and Jütersonke, *Urban Safety and Peacebuilding*.

⁵⁰See note 39 above.

and keeping apart.⁵¹ Cities are home to police forces and criminal organisations, urban planners and private corporations, city institutions and NGOs, the socio-economically dominant and the poor and marginalised.⁵² They are made up of sites with diverse purposes and usages – e.g. gated communities and upscale shops, homeless shelters and slums, infrastructural nodes, shopping districts, industrial areas, and green spaces.⁵³ Heterogeneity also applies to roles cities play in their wider contexts, such as economic powerhouses, political centres, infrastructural nodes, cultural capitals, and social melting pots.⁵⁴ Cities are furthermore dense in the sense that they concentrate and ‘throw-together’⁵⁵ these heterogenous elements so that people with diverse political affiliation and identities live and operate in close proximity; city institutions, criminal organisations, and informal institutions overlap when ordering the city; and schools, homeless shelters, and banks are located in the same streets and buildings.⁵⁶ Cities are lastly open and permeable in the sense that they offer contact points between which movement is possible, so that their densely located heterogenous elements have somewhere to meet – like streets, parks, cafés, and public halls – and ways of getting there – like pavements, public transport, and roads.⁵⁷

In terms of how cities function, unavoidable mixing means that different urban elements are forced to engage each other.⁵⁸ Cities are often understood as meeting places where unexpected, random, and spontaneous encounters and juxtapositions happen.⁵⁹ Yet this mixing is not only made possible in the city – it is unavoidable. Density combined with openness and permeability throw together the city’s elements so much that they are denied isolation from each other, making mixing something which actually is ‘impossible to avoid for more than a brief moment’.⁶⁰ Rich and poor communities are thus intertwined, criminals and police must constantly engage, and religious venues have to coexist with decadent clubs.⁶¹ This inevitable mixing tends to generate conflict, because when heterogenous elements engage each other in dense, open, and permeable spaces where they are forced to mix, conflicting interests and practices are hard to

⁵¹Ash Amin and Stephen Graham, ‘The ordinary city’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22 no. 4 (1997): 411–429; Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (Brace and Company, 1938); AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Duke University Press, 2004). Elements are here taken to everything that can be found within the city – e.g. people, groups, ideologies, norms, security forces, locations, and so on.

⁵²Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Polity, 2002); and Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Penguin, 1994).

⁵³Brenner, *Implosions/Explosions*; Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Blackwell, 1996); and Robert Park, ‘The city’, *The American Journal of Sociology* 20t, no. 5 (1915): 577–612.

⁵⁴Amin and Graham, ‘The ordinary city’; Robert A. Beauregard, *Cities in the Urban Age: A Dissent* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

⁵⁵Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (Sage, 2005).

⁵⁶Amin and Graham, ‘The ordinary city’; Zygmunt Bauman, *City of Fears, City of Hopes* (Goldsmiths College & University of London, 2003); Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*; and Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵⁷Colin McFarlane, *Fragments of the City: Making and Remaking Urban Worlds* (University of California Press, 2021); Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*; and Jenny Robinson, ‘Inventions and interventions: Transforming Cities, an Introduction’, *Urban Studies* 43, no. 2 (2006): 251–258.

⁵⁸Park, ‘The City’; Shtern and Rokem, ‘Towards Urban Geopolitics’; and Iris Marion Young, ‘The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference’, in *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁵⁹Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*; and Ali Madanipour, ‘Social Exclusion, Space, and Time’, in *The City Reader*, eds. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (Routledge, 2020).

⁶⁰Bauman, *City of Fears*, 27; see also Amin and Graham, ‘The Ordinary City’; and Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (Yale University Press, 2008).

⁶¹Beauregard, *Cities in the Urban Age*; and Simone, *For the City*.

avoid.⁶² The political, economic, social, symbolic, and infrastructural importance of cities also leads to conflicts over them,⁶³ while causes and consequences of conflict – such as economic inequality, protests, and repression – often are most pronounced in cities.⁶⁴ This effectively makes cities ‘clashing point[s]’ for different segments of society.⁶⁵

In the context of violent contestation, this understanding of cities implies that these cities hold, and urban life consists of, radically different antagonists who dispute the political order and are densely located, have somewhere to interact, and are forced to engage in unavoidable conflict (this is actually part of the explanation for their violent nature). Yet this conflictual geography does not mean that everything is perpetually contested in cities, that every meeting is hostile and each street a battlefield, or that cooperation is impossible. The city’s spatial and social geography also leads to multiple dynamics which can transform conflict and generate coexistence. People who live in close proximity to one another in cities are able to meet ‘the other’ in everyday life rather than as some distant, opaque, and/or caricatured image.⁶⁶ The inevitable mixing in cities can also lead to ‘chance encounters’⁶⁷ and enhanced ‘co-presence’⁶⁸ that make people realise that they are quite similar and share both interests and challenges. This can lead to transcended differences, the promotion of ‘new kinds of social relationships’⁶⁹ and alternative ways of living, and shared institutions and networks dealing with common problems.⁷⁰ The complexity of cities also leads to strong interdependency between different groups, institutions, and ways of life.⁷¹ Cities feature challenges which know no borders and therefore are shared and best addressed together (flooding, homelessness, waste management) and have almost indivisible resources (water and sewer systems, road networks, electricity grids, public transport infrastructure) that everyone needs and few can control on their own.⁷² This enforced thrown-togetherness – of being ‘in it together’ spatially, politically, economically, infrastructurally, and socially – means that the viability of city life depends on its heterogenous elements establishing at least some minimum form of cooperation through shared institutional frameworks or loose social or political networks.⁷³ Cities are also hubs for creative networks, trade and exchange between economic clusters, new art forms, and

⁶²Amin and Graham, ‘The Ordinary City’, 413; and Bauman, *City of Fears*; and Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*.

⁶³Gusic, ‘Divided cities’.

⁶⁴Elfversson, Emma, Kristine Höglund, Angela Muvumba Sellström and Camille Pellerin, ‘Contesting the Growing City? Forms of Urban Growth and Consequences for Communal Violence’, *Political Geography* 100 (2023): 102810; Elfversson and Höglund, ‘Violence in the City’; and Verena Frick, ‘Understanding the Democratic Promise of the City’, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2023).

⁶⁵Amin and Graham, ‘The Ordinary City’, 413.

⁶⁶Ash Amin, ‘Collective Culture and Urban Public Space’, *City* 12, no. 1 (2008): 5–24; Bauman, *City of Fears*; Karen Büscher, ‘African Cities and Violent Conflict: The Urban Dimension of Conflict and Post Conflict Dynamics in Central and Eastern Africa’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12, no. 12 (2018); and Simone, *For the City*.

⁶⁷Massey, *For Space*.

⁶⁸Rokem and Vaughan, ‘Segregation, Mobility and Encounters’.

⁶⁹Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization: Culture, Innovation, and Urban Order* (Phoenix Giant, 1999), 281.

⁷⁰Nufar Avni, Noam Brenner, Dan Miodownik, and Gillad Rosen, ‘Limited Urban Citizenship: The Case of Community Councils in East Jerusalem’, *Urban Geography* 43, no. 4 (2022): 546–566; Beauregard, *Cities in the Urban Age*; Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)?’; Elfversson et al., ‘Contesting the Growing City?’; and Jonathan Rokem, ‘Introduction: learning from Jerusalem rethinking urban conflicts in the 21st century’, *City* 20, no. 3 (2016a): 400–04.

⁷¹Beauregard, *Cities in the Urban Age*, 134; See also Park, ‘The city’; and Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)?’

⁷²Cobbinah, Patrick Brandful, and Rhoda Mensah Darkwah, ‘Toward a more Desirable form of Sustainable Urban Development in Africa’, *African Geographical Review* 36, no. 3 (2017): 262–285; and Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (Routledge, 2001).

⁷³Richard Boyd, ‘The Value of Civility?’, *Urban Studies* 43, no. 5–6 (2006): 863–878; Massey, *For Space*; and Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’.

innovations in everything from goods and services to architecture and public transport.⁷⁴ These dynamics require stability and co-presence between whatever incompatible groups, ways of life, institutions, and interests exist in the city.⁷⁵

In essence, urban life thus demands coexistence. Sometimes this coexistence takes the form of cross-fertilisation where differences are transcended and new relations, groups, or norms are generated. Cities – including violently contested urban areas – tend to be where vibrant civil society, progressive political movements, and new notions of citizenship emerge.⁷⁶ At other times, coexistence takes the form of pragmatic engagement when and where cooperation is needed or indifference towards ‘the other’ when only co-presence is required.⁷⁷ Yet it is coexistence nonetheless. Without neglecting their destructive potential – which generates violence, inequality, and destruction⁷⁸ – cities also often *do* hold remarkable levels of coexistence. City life is therefore often theorised as ‘the being-together of strangers’⁷⁹ and the ideologies and norms, socio-political orders, ways of life, sites and areas, and groups formed by this being-togetherness.

These urban dynamics mean that violently contested cities also have the potential to generate improved relations or even reconciliation between antagonists, shared socio-political rule permeated by cooperation and interdependence, and new ways of dealing with conflict non-violently.⁸⁰ It is from these theoretical points of departure that the different articles in this special issue begin their exploration of how coexistence can be reached in violently contested cities and what dynamics facilitate and hinder these processes. This constructive potential largely resonates with recent research on the everyday and the ability of ordinary people to, through their routine and quotidian ways of life and interactions, re-constitute their social environment.⁸¹ Our argument, however, goes beyond most of this literature through our shared understanding that the spatiality and urban dynamics found in violently contested cities shape and condition – rather than just are arenas for – these encounters and negotiations.⁸²

⁷⁴Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*; and Hall, *Cities in Civilization*.

⁷⁵Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*; and Eric Laurier and Chris Philo, ‘Cold Shoulders and Napkins Handed: Gestures of Responsibility’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31, no. 2 (2006): 193–207.

⁷⁶James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, ‘Cities and Citizenship’, *Public Culture* 8, no. 2 (1996): 187–204; Jacqueline Klopp and Jeffrey Paller, ‘Slum politics in Africa’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford, 2019); John Nagle, ‘“Unity in Diversity”: Non-sectarian Social Movement Challenges to the Politics of Ethnic Antagonism in Violently Divided Cities’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 1 (2013): 78–92; and Saskia Sassen, ‘Urban Capabilities. An Essay on Our Challenges and Differences’, *Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (2012): 85–95.

⁷⁷Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)?’, Loren Landau and Iriann Freemantle, ‘Beggaring Belonging in Africa’s No-man’s Lands: Diversity, Usufruct and the Ethics of Accommodation’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, no. 6 (2016): 933–951; and Sennett, *Together*.

⁷⁸Beauregard, *Cities in the Urban Age*.

⁷⁹Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁸⁰Björkdahl, ‘Urban Peacebuilding’; Büscher, ‘African Cities and Violent Conflict’; Carabelli, *The Divided City*; Gusic, *Contesting Peace*; Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)?’; and Jonathan Rokem and Laura Vaughan, ‘Segregation, Mobility and Encounters in Jerusalem: The Role of Public Transport Infrastructure in Connecting the “divided City”’, *Urban Studies* 55, no. 15 (2018): 3454–3473.

⁸¹Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace*; and Sukanya Podder, ‘The Power in-between: Youth’s Subaltern Agency and the Post-conflict Everyday’, *Peacebuilding* 3, no. 1 (2015): 36–57.

⁸²Büscher, ‘African Cities and Violent Conflict’; Danielak, ‘Conflict Urbanism’; Kaldor and Sassen, *Cities at War*; Gusic, ‘Peace Between Peace(s)?’; and Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Everyday Agency and Transformation’.

Key insights from this special issue

This special issue consists of seven articles which are written from different disciplinary perspectives, employ a wide spectrum of theoretical and methodological approaches, and study the violently contested city through multiple empirical contexts. They comprise nuanced and grounded studies of hitherto underexplored aspects of the violently contested city, use approaches such as policy analysis, spatio-temporal analysis of satellite imagery, interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and includes cities such as Beirut (Lebanon), Cucuta and Medellin (Colombia), Manama (Bahrain), Jerusalem (Israel-Palestine), Kidal (Mali), and Grenoble (France).

The diversity of these articles produces multifaceted analyses which explore the causes and effects of urban conflict(s) as well as how different strategies and mechanisms – like everyday mediation, reconstruction efforts, improved urban governance, and public protests – might transform conflict, deescalate violence, and generate coexistence. The articles explore and theorise different forms of violence, including direct and structural, infrastructural, criminal, insurgent, and state-led. They zoom in on the microscale of streets and homes but also zoom out to explore citywide dynamics, contextualise the role violently contested cities play in their wider contexts, and analyse the impact of peace agreements on relations in the city. They focus on ‘mundane’ aspects of everyday urban life but also analyse the dynamics underpinning citywide planning decisions or endemic corruption, analysing themes such as socioeconomic inequality and segregation, public protests, urban ruins and postwar reconstruction, refugee arrivals, and securitisation of urban space.

Each article thereby adds its own theoretical and empirical lens. Yet they also make a collective contribution towards theorising and exploring the same overarching issue: finding pathways to coexistence in violently contested cities. While not an exhaustive overview, we highlight four key insights generated collectively through the special issue and across the different contributions.

The first insight is that violence, insecurities, and marginalisation certainly are highly entrenched in violently contested cities. While this is hardly surprising, what this special issue uncovers is the way this violence relates to the different forms of coexistence that the articles explore. While they certainly identify both examples of and hopes for urban coexistence – as described below – such instances are often best described as constructive cracks in otherwise destructive facades, or distant hopes competing with largely bleak outlooks – as exemplified by the coping strategies of refugees in the entrenched, multifaceted, and overlapping violence(s) of Cúcuta⁸³ or the shared Israeli-Palestinian visions of a tolerant and inclusive Jerusalem in the midst of increasing violence, political radicalisation, and an all but dead peace process.⁸⁴

The second insight, however, is that these smaller cracks and distant hopes indeed *do* exist – both as real examples and genuine promises – and largely due to the spatially and socially complex constitution and functioning of cities. Several articles show that the diverse nature of cities allows marginalised urban actors opportunities to resist oppression, negotiate coexistence, and find ways to cope. Smaira & Gunning show how the constitution and functioning of cities force radically different actors (e.g. people

⁸³See Mantilla in this special issue.

⁸⁴See Lehrs et al. in this special issue.

belonging to different identity groups, Hizballah members, soldiers in the Lebanese Army, Palestinian refugees) to exist together in dense, interconnected, and constantly entangled city spaces of Dahiyeh in southern Beirut. They also show how city life allows them to negotiate peace in unexpected constellations and through new networks and alliances. These ‘everyday mediation’ practices may be formal and informal, temporary and permanent, spontaneous and planned, eagerly or reluctantly engaged in. Nevertheless, they bring people together, allow the marginalised to make themselves heard, and force conflicting groups to compromise, largely because the density and diversity of city life demands this. Mantilla similarly shows how urban informality, interdependency, and constant mixing allow ‘so-called ordinary people’,⁸⁵ refugees, civil society activists, and community leaders (all of which operate in urban margins) to negotiate an uneasy but functioning coexistence with violent security forces, criminal networks, and armed groups. This is demonstrated in the border town of Cúcuta, where over the last three decades a flux of immigrants has arrived in the city, proliferating a long-fought border war between Colombia and Venezuela and a domestic ‘violent peace’ fraught with kidnappings, decapitations, and sporadic urban conflict by paramilitary groups.

Mabon & Nagle in turn show how the same dynamics allow urban actors to come together publicly and performatively, in large collectives, and around principled grievances – rather than informally, in small groups, and focusing on ad hoc problems as in the examples above – to protest against ruling ethnonational elites and the political realities both supporting and supported by them. What is noteworthy is not only how the density, openness, permeability, heterogeneity, and mixing of cities allow a vast number of people to gather quickly and protest in spaces of symbolic (main squares, outside parliaments, memorials) and concrete (infrastructural nodes, police headquarters, government buildings) importance and thereby pose direct threats to ruling elites. It is also that it holds the potential to bring radically different – and often conflicting – groups together. This was evident in both Beirut and Manama where groups exposed to decades of ‘divide and rule’ politics by elites – who exploit rather than address societal divisions and subsequently pitch these protesters against each other – transcended divisions for shared goals. The result was heterogeneous protests that included people with different ethnonational, religious and sectarian identities (e.g. Christians, Sunnis, and Shias), across class divisions (e.g. immigrants and citizens), and from marginalised backgrounds (e.g. LGBTQs and ethnic minorities) fighting for equality, human rights, and political accountability and against sectarianism, corruption, and impunity. The conflict over the city was in both cases transformed from a horizontal one (between different groups) to a vertical one (‘people’ against ‘elites’). We also learn from Mabon & Nagle’s article that the urban nature of these protests was key in both Beirut and Manama when forging right-to-the-city movements which demand better public services, an end to corruption and sectarianism, and recognition by the state. The claim for equal distribution of public services for marginalised groups – and the daily protests demanding human rights – unsettled the ethnic and sectarian supremacy and reproduced the right-to-the-city as part of a long-term goal for urban peacebuilding.

⁸⁵Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace*.

Hoelscher & Harboe take an ‘architectural turn’ and show that by opening up, connecting, and giving content to previously closed, disconnected, and ‘empty/void’ public spaces, aspects such as density, heterogeneity, and mixing enable these spaces to generate new constellations and networks that cooperate across dividing lines, make people meet ‘others’, and become safer due to being much more frequented. Through an analysis of Medellín’s all-embracing socio-political action plan to reduce urban inequality and violence, the positive chemistry of politics, architecture, and urban design is exposed. Hoelscher & Harboe show how Medellín’s transformative social urbanism agenda encapsulated a range of urban peacebuilding achievements by forging an inclusive political project that ties public service provision and the renovation of public space, generating mobility and accessibility for the local community. It also shows how the social, political, and economic interests of different actors in the city can be harnessed towards urban peacebuilding as well as the successes but also limitations inherent in ‘branding’ Medellín as a progressive global city.

Lehrs, Brenner, Avni, & Miodownik focus not so much on achieved as on potential progress. They demonstrate that urban actors in Jerusalem – both activists and the overall population – seem more open to coexistence and shared control over the city than state actors are, that they tend to value ‘softer’ issues such as urban diplomacy and local civil society (more common in and important to city life) and that they find ‘harder’ issues such as borders, territory, and formal control (of key importance from a statist perspective) less important. The result is that urban actors seem much more willing to live together than non-urban actors, and that they see the value in and are prepared to compromise extensively to do so. This contrasts with narratives often emphasised by formal negotiators, such as animosity towards and division with ‘the other’, predictable and one-sided dominance, rigid or even non-penetrable borders, and security infrastructure. The visions emphasised by urban actors can be understood in the context of living in a city which – to some degree at least – functions through mutual dependence, (uneasy and unequal) coexistence, and regular contact.

In all these cases, the theorised constructive potential of violently contested cities is there – either as attained realities or future hopes. And while many of these smaller cracks or distant hopes are located in otherwise destructive realities or bleak outlooks, they need not be. The end-result of protests is not always that they are crushed, fade away, or are undermined by internal fighting. Just as everyday mediation limited to certain groups, areas, or neighbourhoods does not need to stay like that. Nor do urban actors always have to be excluded from wider peacebuilding processes which affect them but tend to exclude, neglect, or downplay urban issues. If these limited realities and hopes can be expanded and realised, the violently contested city can spearhead rather than hinder wider peace processes.

The third insight is that the city’s Janus-faced nature – an often theorised and empirically illustrated characteristic, suggesting that the same aspects of cities which give it constructive potential also drive destructive dynamics – also shows when it comes to urban peacebuilding initiatives. We just elaborated on some promising realities of and hopes for urban coexistence. Yet what also emerges from the articles is that similar settings (people living close by), strategies (everyday mediation), or mechanisms (co-dependence on urban resources) can – and often do – generate directly destructive

results. Rather than lowering violence and building new intergroup networks and initiatives, urban dynamics theorised to promote peace can also generate violence and lead to more conflict and animosities between the same and/or new groups. Part of the explanation – as the different articles show – is that the inherent complexity and unique constitution and functioning of cities create specific challenges that any initiative for coexistence needs to be aware of and adapt to. Otherwise, the results are likely to be non-existent or even counterproductive.

In other words, as several of the articles illustrate, strategies intended to build peace in violently contested cities need to be adapted to the idiosyncrasies of cities and urbanity as well as attuned to the complexities of issues found there, rather than having ‘universal’ solutions focusing only on limited aspects of any given issue.⁸⁶ An example is Medellín, which is often hailed for its transformation of space and its role in the subsequent decrease of violence, conflict, and insecurity. Yet, as Hoelscher & Harboe show, the regeneration of buildings, squares, and other public spaces would have had little effect had they not tied into other problems faced by these ‘regenerated’ communities such as socioeconomic deprivation and inequality, which includes poor schools, transport infrastructures, public parks, and libraries.⁸⁷ Only regenerating the built environment, the authors argue, would have achieved little. The articles by Danielak and Lehrs et al. in turn demonstrate the importance of adapting any given strategy or intervention to urban settings as well as the consequences of not doing so. Danielak shows that the disengagement of the United Nations stabilisation mission in Mali (MINUSMA) with urban life, when operating in cities and building massive bases next to them, has meant that the mission at times has been unable to address local conflicts or protect civilians to the extent desired or expected. Through a study of Kidal, Gao, and Mopti it is illustrated that MINUSMA has contributed to militarisation – in the form of ‘super camps’, social and physical distance between peacekeepers and communities, and heavily armed spaces – in these cities.

As Danielak shows, the lens of ‘conflict urbanism’ helps highlight how peacekeeping can inadvertently contribute to instability, broken urban dynamics, and infrastructural violence in violently contested cities. The article concludes that an inattentiveness to the urban context in which the peacekeeping troops were deployed is at least partly responsible for these problems. Lehrs et al. in turn show how the exclusion of Jerusalemites – on both the Israeli and Palestinian side – from the state-led negotiating teams has generated peace agreements which are not attuned to urban idiosyncrasies, which ignore or neglect issues important to Jerusalemites, and which ultimately result in agreements which either do not resonate with or even undermine urban life. Their argument – whose sentiment is shared across the articles – is instead that to build peace and generate coexistence in cities, we need to ‘see [peace, conflict, and coexistence] like a city’ rather than a state. This means including those who have to live in any given outcome of urban peace, addressing the concerns and needs they might have, as well as focusing on issues important to urban life and the functioning of cities.

⁸⁶Marco Allegra, Anna Casaglia and Jonathan Rokem, ‘The Political Geographies of Urban Polarisation: A Critical Review of Research on Divided Cities’, *Geography Compass* 6, no. 9 (2012): 560–574.

⁸⁷See also C. Ortiz and C. Boano, ‘The Medellín’s Shifting Geopolitics of Informality: The Encircled Garden as a Dispositif of Civil Disenfranchisement?’ in *Urban Geopolitics: Rethinking Planning in Contested Cities*, eds. Rokem and Boano (London: Routledge, 2018).

The fourth and concluding insight is that there is much to be gained by broadening our scope and contrasting different cities and their often shared challenges and opportunities. The different articles focused on radically different settings, trajectories, and issues. Yet what becomes obvious is that these cities have a multitude of commonalities while neither their challenges nor their opportunities respect theoretical or empirical dividing lines. This applies to the distinction between cities affected by war and cities whose experiences of war – if any – are generations away, with Djikema & Mouafo showing that these distinctions often do not make much sense: the French government’s involvement in the ‘war on terror’, its militarised police forces, and its vilification of the (mostly immigrant) disenfranchised suburban populations has both brought the war ‘over there’ home and generated similar violence(s), traumas, and grievances as war zones do. In contrast to most studies of violently contested cities – which they argue are predominantly focused at non-Western cities ravaged by ‘conventional’ war – Djikema & Mouafo demonstrate that Grenoble (France) has many things in common with such cities. It is a violently contested city which is not at peace and whose citizens experience different forms of violence including state-based police brutality, local crime, global terrorism, anti-terrorist campaigns, and anti-Islamic harassment. The article thus challenges distinctions between war and peace as well as between ‘ordinary’ and ‘violently contested’ cities.⁸⁸ Everyone might not agree with the collapses of this distinction. Yet their article demonstrates that many of the problems associated either with ‘ordinary’ or ‘violently contested’ cities in fact are shared problems – be it segregation, marginalisation, or direct and structural violence.⁸⁹ These different cities have many fundamental dynamics in common, due to the contested nature of urbanity as well as the theoretical and empirical collapse of the war-peace distinction.⁹⁰ Similar dynamics can be found in most (if not all) cities around the world. While the violently contested nature of the cities explored here might dissolve, worsen, or alter these problems, they are neither unique to these urban areas nor exclusively tied to or caused by their violent contestation.⁹¹ As illustrated throughout the different articles, this applies to cities that are controlled by one faction as well as those divided or shared by several contending ones.

These commonalities, however, are not only found in challenges, violence(s), and insecurities. Many of the aspects with constructive potential in violently contested cities can also be found in other cities. This goes for the ability of urban areas to bring diverse people together as well as to force interdependent groups to cooperate; the role of cities as sites for protest movements that can alter the political trajectory of any given society; and the need for (uneasy, spontaneous, flexible, innovative, and shared) everyday negotiations to sustain urban life, everyday mobility, and accessibility. These shared aspects and blurred boundaries do not remove the need for contextualisation and paying attention to the particular trajectories of each and every violently contested

⁸⁸See Gusic, ‘Divided Cities’; Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Challenging the “here” and “there” of Peace and Conflict Research: Migrants’ Encounters with Streams of Violence and Streams of Peace’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 5 (2022): 584–599; and Rokem, ‘Introduction: Learning from Jerusalem’.

⁸⁹Allegra et al., ‘The Political Geographies’; and Rokem, ‘Introduction: Learning from Jerusalem’.

⁹⁰Beauregard, *Cities in the Urban Age*; Pavoni and Tulumello, ‘What is Urban Violence?’; and Oliver P. Richmond and Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Mobilities and Peace’, *Globalizations* 16, no. 5 (2019): 606–624.

⁹¹Gusic, *Contesting Peace*.

city.⁹² But it does mean that insights and inspiration, warning signs and failures, breakdowns and joint achievements can be drawn from across the board from cities that are violently contested as well as not.

Conclusion

This special issue theorises the constructive potential of violently conflicted cities and explores how urban actors are able to harness this potential through different strategies that make everyday life safer and improve the city's internal and external functioning. By placing analytical focus on urban geographies of peace in the midst of violent contestation, the different contributions add to the growing literature on violently contested cities and urban peacebuilding. The principal aim in this special issue has been to uncover strategies and mechanisms that can break the dynamics of violence and repression, lead to urban coexistence, and generate more peaceful relations in cities, across different world regions and geopolitical contexts. The articles show how urban citizens are able to use different dimensions of urban dynamics to push for more inclusive urban politics, create new relationships and networks, and create new and shared visions of coexistence. While often overshadowed by the destructive realities in these cities, such examples of non-violence, coexistence, and reconciliation are significant and hold the possibility of broader transformative opportunities.

Several of the articles emphasise the agency and ability of ordinary urban citizens to navigate the violently contested city and create coping strategies, informal networks, and everyday practices that help them increase their own security and quality of life in the midst of violence. In many cases, these everyday practices also go further, putting pressure on governments and violent actors to facilitate and promote local collaboration and peace initiatives, either in a more metaphorical sense such as in the case of Jerusalem, or more practical and concrete urban actions as in Medellín. Such findings resonate with the everyday peace literature, by uncovering dynamics of grassroots resistance to militarisation and exclusionary governance structures with urban planning and architecture as well as transformative agendas taking precedence.

By illustrating how urban dynamics can create opportunities for peace in violently contested cities, the findings also speak to the broader literature on urban coexistence. The specific strategies and practices emphasised in this special issue – informal mediation, youth collectives, right-to-the-city mobilisations, and socio-spatial transformation – could arguably be applied to strengthen urban coexistence and everyday peace in other cases where rapid urbanisation, environmental stress, and economic hardship risk destabilising cities.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for feedback from the participants in the Urban peace and conflict workshop (held online September 2021) and from the external reviewer and editorial team at *Peacebuilding*.

⁹²Cf. Elfversson et al., 'Postwar Cities'; Jamie Peck, 'Cities beyond Compare?' *Regional Studies* 49, no. 1 (2015): 160–182; and Simone, 'Cities of the Global South'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was funded by the Swedish Research Council [grant numbers 2019-02563 and 2019-03870] and JPI Urban Europe [grant number 3964330].

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