Urban History (2026), **53**, 32–40
doi:10.1017/S0963926825000136

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

INTRODUCTION
SPECIAL ISSUE: NEIGHBOURHOODS AND THE COLONIAL CITY, 1870–1940

Introduction: uneasy neighbours: proximity, sociability and difference in the colonial city, *c.* 1870–1940

Avner Ofrath[1] and Norman Aselmeyer[2]

[1]Friedrich Meinecke Institute of History, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany and [2]Wadham College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
Corresponding author: Avner Ofrath; Email: avner.ofrath@fu-berlin.de

Abstract
This introductory essay establishes the site of the neighbourhood and the social fact of urban proximity as crucial, conflicted and volatile conditions of colonial society. We show that the colonial neighbourhood was a highly contested space where diverse populations, stark inequalities and asymmetric power distributions played out in the most palpable manner. At the same time, it also emerged as an incubator of sociability, solidarity and protest across communal lines. The constant tension between physical proximity and profound inequality defined much of the social dynamics in the colonial city, making neighbours and neighbourhoods a most promising terrain of enquiry.

How should we approach the social reality of the colonial city? Scholars have been preoccupied with this question for at least five decades. In that cause, historians, sociologists and urban scholars have explored the colonial quest to segregate cities, the idea and practice of 'master plans' as a means of domination and perceived 'modernization', the use of urban space to stage the 'civilizing mission' and the role of cities as hotbeds of anti-colonial resistance and dissent.

The aim of this collection of articles is to establish the physical site of the neighbourhood and the social fact of urban proximity as crucial, contested and volatile conditions of colonial society. While Jane Jacobs' famous contention from 1961 that 'neighbours have nothing more fundamental in common with each other than…a fragment of geography' certainly has bearing in the Western European and North American context since at least the mid-twentieth century, in the colonial city that 'fragment of geography' was crucial.[1] The colonial neighbourhood was the central site where political power and control were exercised and negotiated. But it also emerged as an incubator of sociability, solidarity and protest across communal lines. Unlike the Western European neighbourhood, which emerged as the site of

[1]J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, 1961), 112.

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spatially grounded social cohesion (whether real or imagined, as in Max Weber's reflections on the figure of the neighbour), colonial neighbourhoods were often highly contested spaces, where diverse populations, stark inequalities and asymmetric power distributions played out in a most palpable manner.[2] Colonial city dwellers sharing even the most intimate spaces were not actors on equal footing, and their relations were characterized by strong disparities. In this tense environment, the merest incidents and disputes could be interpreted as a transgression and lead to eruptions of violence.[3] The constant tension between physical proximity and profound inequality defined much of the social dynamics in the colonial city, making neighbours and neighbourhoods a most promising terrain of enquiry.[4]

Understanding the colonial neighbourhood: diversity, proximity and interaction

Despite its centrality to everyday life, the term 'neighbourhood' remains somewhat elusive, as the function, character and role of neighbourhoods vary significantly across time and space.[5] While some division of urban space into smaller units is arguably a common feature of cities throughout the globe – indeed 'one of the few universals of urban life' – the question of how to strictly define a neighbourhood remains open.[6] Cities in Islamic-ruled North Africa and the Middle East, for instance, had long featured residential neighbourhoods organized in correlation to ethnic–religious affiliation – a correlation that was less rigid than in European colonial portrayals but nevertheless present in the lives of urban residents.[7] By contrast, urban settlements in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia that preceded the colonial era consisted of differentiated, sometimes discrete quarters which were mostly organized along the lines of kinship, political loyalties, caste, religion or occupation.[8] In the present discussion, we understand the neighbourhood as both a spatial and a social

[2]M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen, 1922), 198. There were, of course, cases of homogeneous neighbourhoods in colonial cities.

[3]J. Cole, *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria* (Ithaca, NY, 2019), 71; H. Cohen, *Year Zero of the Arab–Israeli Conflict 1929* (Waltham, 2015), 59–61; D. Anderson, 'Punishment, race and "the raw native": settler society and Kenya's flogging scandals', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37 (2011), 479–97.

[4]See, for instance, W. Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York, 2017).

[5]D. Garrioch and M. Peel, 'The social history of urban neighbourhoods', *Journal of Urban History*, 32 (2006), 663–76, at 664.

[6]M.E. Smith, 'The archaeological study of neighbourhoods and districts in ancient cities', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 29 (2010), 137–64, at 137; see also E. Talen, *Neighbourhood* (Oxford, 2018), 11.

[7]On neighbourhoods in the 'Arabo-Islamic city', see J.L. Abu Lughod, 'The Islamic city – historic myth, Islamic essence, and contemporary relevance', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19 (1987), 155–76, esp. 163–71. On European portrayals vs local designations, see, for instance, A. Arnon, 'The quarters of Jerusalem in the Ottoman period', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 28 (1992), 1–65. On spatial differentiation and religious affiliation, see, for instance, E. Gottreich, *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco's Red City* (Bloomington, 2007).

[8]See, for instance, M. Baumanova, L. Smejda and H. Rüther, 'Pre-colonial origins of urban spaces in the Western African Sahel: street networks, trade, and spatial plurality', *Journal of Urban History*, 45 (2017), 500–16; G. Connah, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective* (Cambridge, 2016); J. Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Portsmouth, NH, 2000), 10–17; S. Jha, D.N. Pathak and A.K. Das (eds.), *Neighbourhoods in Urban India: In Between Home and the City* (New Delhi, 2021).

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relation of urban proximity, unfolding in various spaces, often defying the boundaries between the private and the public sphere: on streets, in marketplaces, in public buildings, universities and of course in residential quarters and apartment buildings.

While racialist categorizations became significant features of all urban settings of the colonized world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were particularly manifest in cities that were created *by* European colonists. Significantly, below the racial division of towns existed a subdivision of neighbourhoods according to class, occupation and religion. The highly diverse city of Nairobi is a case in point. Railway companies in the early colonial period constructed housing estates for railway workers, which developed into independent, sought-after neighbourhoods. Military veterans had their own neighbourhood, created by the colonial government for demobilized Sudanese soldiers after World War I. In the eastern part of Nairobi, a predominately Muslim neighbourhood emerged, whose original inhabitants had come from Kenya's Islamic-influenced coastal region. There were also economic disparities between neighbourhoods, particularly between poorer South Asian residential quarters in the city centre and wealthier classes in the northern suburbs.[9]

None of these delineations were constant or clear-cut, as populations of colonial neighbourhoods changed over time. In many cases, they became more heterogeneous and mobile, their occupations more complex and the lifestyles and cultures of the inhabitants more diverse. As a result, monolithic concepts of community and identity became meaningless as defining characteristics of neighbourhoods. The urban history of East Africa, for instance, reminds us that we need to be cautious not to elevate insights gained from the test cases in this collection into sweeping generalizations. Urban environments in the late colonial age, such as in Dar es Salaam, often engendered 'supertribal' identities.[10] While at the beginning of colonial rule, identifying with one's place of residence was widespread among residents, as the neighbourhood was often associated with kinship, spatial identification became weaker with growing urbanization, deteriorating living conditions and forced relocations. If there was any identification at all, it was an identity of status, which for non-European inhabitants was often associated with 'universal misery', as was the case in colonial Bombay, Lagos, Dakar, Saigon and other urban centres shortly before independence.[11]

Yet, for all its diversity across political constellations and geographic regions, the colonial neighbourhood provides a most fruitful terrain of enquiry, as the articles in this collection demonstrate. Neighbourhoods were more than mere administrative units or geographic locators. For their residents, they constituted the universe of daily lives and thus shaped the experience of living – and living together – in a colonial city.

Seeking to capture the realities of urban life in a colony, the following articles are preoccupied with three aspects that were crucial to the experience of living together in colonial neighbourhoods: spatial proximity, cultural and legal differentiation and

[9]B.A. Ogot, *History of Nairobi 1899–2012* (Kisumu, 2020); D. Anderson, 'Corruption at City Hall: African housing and urban development in colonial Nairobi', in A. Burton (ed.), *The Urban Experience in Eastern Africa, c. 1750–2000* (Nairobi, 2002), 138–54.

[10]J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1994), 391; B. Freund, *The African City: A History* (Cambridge, 2007), 90.

[11]R.M. Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds: A Kikuyu's Story* (London, 1964), 75. See also S. Chhabria, *Making the Modern Slum: The Power of Capital in Colonial Bombay* (Seattle, 2019); M. Muritala, *Livelihood in Colonial Lagos* (Lanham, 2019); O. Faye, *Dakar et ses cultures: un siècle de changements d'une ville coloniale* (Paris, 2017); H. Cherry, *Down and Out in Saigon: Stories of the Poor in a Colonial City* (New Haven, 2019).

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social interaction.[12] They ask a series of new questions. How was spatial proximity managed and how did shared spaces affect forms and norms of solidarity and sociability? How were socio-cultural differences and legal inequalities negotiated? How was social interaction regulated and controlled? Through the study of selected neighbourhoods and small towns throughout the colonized world of the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the articles in this collection render visible layers of the social, political and intellectual history of shaping and sharing urban space under colonial rule that have long passed unnoticed or been mistaken for trivial in scholarship.

By focusing on small urban units, the contributions to this collection make three central, inter-related contributions. First, they draw on new sources, archives and methods long under-represented in the scholarship of the Global North to recalibrate the long, pre-colonial histories of inhabiting, shaping and describing the built environment by urban dwellers and their continued presence under colonial rule. With this in mind, the articles presented here allow us, secondly, to grasp the social significance, but also the volatility, of being neighbours and interacting across ethno-religious lines in the shared yet institutionally unequal urban space under colonial rule. Finally, by shifting our attention away from the representative epicentres of colonial urbanism and focusing instead on small and often isolated urban sites, the following contributions demonstrate the limits of the colonial quest to reshape, control and stage the urban environment according to the ethnic and racial categories of European thought. The emerging picture is that of a constantly contested socio-political order and a volatile mode of interacting across group boundaries, both real and imagined.

The contributions to this collection explore neighbourhoods and urban proximity patterns through different methodological lenses and in different regions of the colonized world during the high age of direct European colonial rule: Western Africa, the Maghreb, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. While no selection of case-studies can be exhaustive or fully correspond to any list of strict methodical criteria, we have sought to include cases that represent different urban constellations (remote and central, large and small), societal and political orders (sites shaped by inner migration, migration throughout the Global South and European settlers) and different imperial powers (Britian, France, the Netherlands). To avoid elevating strict definitions over the complexity of social realities, this collection deliberately includes different approaches to neighbourhoods and urban proximity. While some articles are primarily concerned with spatial configurations, others examine the organization of social groups within colonial urban space; and while some articles unpack long-term policies and their impacts, others focus on clearly defined historical moments and turning points.

In her opening article, Jennifer Hart looks into new administrative boundaries created by British colonial officials in Accra in the late nineteenth century, demonstrating how neighbourhood-based solidarities allowed residents to contest, challenge and at times reverse colonial urban policies. Halimat Titilola Somotan studies land ownership disputes in the neighbourhood of Epetedo in Lagos, exploring

[12]A similar definition of neighbourhoods was proposed by the American sociologist R.D. McKenzie, 'The neighbourhood: a study of local life in the city of Columbus, Ohio', *American Journal of Sociology*, 27 (1921), 344–63.

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various political and medial channels through which residents laid claim to land ownership and mediated ensuing conflicts. Monia Bousnina and Avner Ofrath examine shared Jewish–Muslim housing complexes in the provincial Algerian town of Sétif, reconstructing the dynamics and limitations of cohabitation at the colony's much-overlooked urban periphery. Elia Etkin explores urban peripheries in British Mandate Palestine through the test cases of two new Jewish neighbourhoods in Tel Aviv and Haifa, tracing the impact of remoteness and liminality on residents' relation to the over-riding political frames of the time. Michael Yeo rethinks key assumptions of colonial urban history through a study of the peripheral towns of Sandakan and Jesselton (North Borneo), showing how small urban spaces engendered more intensive cross-communal encounters than the large centres of colonial society. Mikko Toivanen studies the role of the neighbourhood as a site of colonial public festivities in Batavia (present-day Jakarta), demonstrating how the staging of colonial culture and sovereignty varied across the city, thus accentuating differences between neighbourhoods. Finally, Javed Iqbal Wani studies communal tensions and common political action in the industrial town of Kanpur in northern India during the 1930s, showcasing how the site of the neighbourhood mediated the social and political life of workers and fostered cross-communal collective action.

Historiographies of neighbourhoods, proximity and the colonial city

This collection of articles builds on a growing scholarly interest in the history of neighbourhoods and neighbour relations in recent years. While the subunit of the neighbourhood has always featured in urban studies, some urban theorists now go as far as arguing that proximity and economic interactions conditioned by it are the defining element of the urban.[13] Research on neighbourhoods between the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has seen a remarkable deepening and theorization. While debates in the 1960s and 1970s, often sparked by the perceived decline of 'traditional' neighbourhood life in the United States, were preoccupied with the social and economic analysis of neighbourhood compositions, scholars have since redirected their focus to the formation of neighbourhoods and their centrality in the experience of city dwellers.[14] In this context, David Garrioch published his influential study on eighteenth-century Paris, arguing that the neighbourhood (*quartier*) was at the centre of life for most Parisians.[15] Since the 1990s, scholarly interest, very much under the influence of the new cultural history, has widened significantly to include the formation of identities in and through neighbourhoods, their representations in memoirs and popular culture and the role of neighbourhood

[13]M. Storper and A.J. Scott, 'Current debates in urban theory: a critical assessment', *Urban Studies*, 53 (2016), 1114–36; *idem* and *idem*, 'The nature of cities: the scope and limits of urban theory', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 39 (2015), 1–15; S. Jha and D.N. Pathak, 'Neighbourhoods and neighbourliness in urban South Asia', in *idem* and *idem* (eds.), *Neighbourhoods and Neighbourliness in Urban South Asia: Subjectivities and Spatiality* (London, 2022), 2.

[14]Z. Miller, 'The role and concept of neighborhood in American cities', in R. Fisher and P. Romanofsky (eds.), *Community Organization for Urban Social Change: A Historical Perspective* (Westport, 1981), 3–31; for the following, see Garrioch and Peel, 'Social history'.

[15]D. Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community in Paris, 1740–1790* (Cambridge, 1986). For a comparative account, see C. Lis and H. Soly, 'Neighbourhood and social change in West European cities: sixteenth to nineteenth century', *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), 1–30.

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spaces in structuring and regulating social life. As a result, the very meaning of 'neighbourhood' in scholarly writing has now been significantly broadened. In an edited volume from 2020, Hilal Alkan and Nazan Maksudyan went as far as defining the neighbourhood as formed by the very interactions amongst residents and the narratives construed around them.[16]

This article and the contributions that follow seek to respond to calls by urban scholars and theorists of the early 2020s to refocus neighbourhood research and to break free from predominantly Western paradigms. Gideon Baffoe and Keith Kintrea demonstrate that neighbourhood research is still predominated by outputs from and on the Global North.[17] As Jennifer Hart and Stephen Marr argue, though urban theory now draws on 'increasingly diverse case studies and incorporates the reflections of an increasingly diverse collection of authors…there is a persistent dominance of European and North American cities: both as examples of "the urban" and as aspirational sites of future urban imaginings'.[18]

This collection of articles joins a growing body of scholarship on neighbourhoods in the Global South that seeks to transcend the still-prevalent framework of segregation and controversies around it in the research on colonial cities. What had been formulated as a catchphrase of anti-colonial theory by Frantz Fanon in 1961 – the colonial city as a 'compartmentalized' space – was picked up by historians, sociologists and urban theorists.[19] In 1965, Janet Abu-Lughod described the major urban centres of newly independent nations as 'dual cities' and in 1981 spoke of 'urban apartheid' in Morocco.[20] Despite an explosion of research on persisting cross-communal relations and interactions under colonial rule and the porousness of colonial urban spaces in recent decades, the segregation framework holds sway. In his monumental *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* from 2012, Carl Nightingale characterized the turn of the twentieth century as the age of 'segregation mania', when this word, already much in use in the United States and Great Britain, was 'picked up by the French, Belgian, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian conquerors of Africa and Asia'.[21]

The emerging field of global urban history increasingly challenges the segregation framework. Global historians often focus on port cities as an important setting of encounter and exchange that allows us to uncover 'different layers of cross-communal interaction', as Su Lin Lewis argues.[22] Michael Goebel shows that cross-

[16]H. Alkan and N. Maksudyan, 'Introduction', in *idem* and *idem* (eds.), *Urban Neighbourhood Formations: Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies* (London, 2020), 1–3. See also Jha and Pathak (eds.), *Neighbourhoods and Neighbourliness in Urban South Asia.*

[17]G. Baffoe and K. Kintrea, 'Neighbourhood research in the global south: what do we know so far?', *Cities*, 132 (2023).

[18]J. Hart and S. Marr, 'Introduction: urban theory futures are turbulent, vernacular, and incomplete (and that's okay)', *Antipode Online*, 13.3.2023, https://antipodeonline.org/2023/03/13/urban-theory-from-the-global-south (accessed 18 Apr. 2024). On 'informal neighbourhoods', see in the same collection R.S. Gonçalves, 'A look at the Global South's urban history through the lens of its informal neighbourhoods'.

[19]F. Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris, 1961), 3–4.

[20]J. Abu-Lughod, 'Tale of two cities: the origins of modern Cairo', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 7 (1965), 429ff; *idem*, *Rabat: Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton, 1981).

[21]C.H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago, 2012), 160.

[22]S.L. Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge, 2016), 10. See also L. Heerten, 'Ankerpunkte der Verflechtung: Hafenstädte in der neueren Globalgeschichtsschreibung', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 43 (2017), 146–75; *idem*, 'Mooring mobilities, fixing

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communal networks and 'middlemen minorities' emerged all across the colonized world.[23] Such interactions were by no means confined to trade and commerce, as Sibel Zandi-Sayek demonstrates in his study of Ottoman urbanism, stressing the 'fluctuating, contingent identities' of heterogeneous urban societies, which were rarely conditioned by 'clear-cut ethnoreligious boundaries and national divides'.[24] Historians and urban scholars of pre-modern periods, for their part, have shown that organizing residential quarters along lines of religion, ethnicity or occupation was a prominent feature of various cities that would later come under European colonial rule.[25]

The question remains, however, how to study the everyday experience of living together in the diverse yet unequal colonial city. Ulrike Freitag suggests the term 'urban conviviality' in order to capture everyday encounters in highly regulated and plural spaces.[26] While this concept is certainly helpful in moving beyond elite interactions, it tends to romanticize the lived reality of city dwellers and leaves little room for the study of tensions and conflicts. As this collection of articles aims to establish, communal tensions were ever-present in the heterogeneous and deeply unequal colonial city – whether as a spectre, a perceived threat or an actual, sanguinary clash. As Ussama Makdisi trenchantly puts it, 'every history of sectarianism is also a history of coexistence'.[27]

Though ethnic tensions, cross-communal encounters and even the quest to segregate were not confined to the colonial city, as various scholars observe, the political conditions of the colonial order significantly accentuated such tensions, turning attempts to mediate them into crucial, often fragile political endeavours.[28] Amid the institutionalized inequality of the colonial order, the excessive powers granted to officials and military commanders and the determination of settlers to secure political and economic privileges, any attempt to forge shared frames and maintain cross-communal relations was doomed to be conditional, precarious and explosive.[29] By examining the very site of such endeavours, this collection seeks to make an intervention in the ongoing debate on the characteristics, changing nature and social–political role of the colonial city, opening new paths of enquiry for a more granular interpretation of colonial societies.

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flows: towards a global urban history of port cities in the age of steam', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 34 (2021), 350–74.

[23]M. Goebel, 'Density and differentiation: cities in global social history', *Historical Journal*, 67 (2024), 670–91, at 684–5.

[24]S. Zandi-Sayek, *Ottoman Izmir: The Rise of a Cosmopolitan Port, 1840–1880* (Minneapolis, 2012), 7.

[25]We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this essay for drawing our attention to this body of scholarship. See, for instance, M. Horton, 'Swahili architecture, space and social structure', in M. Parker Pearson and C. Richards (eds.), *Architecture and Order: Approaches to Social Space* (London, 1994), 147–69; T. Insoll (ed.), *Urbanism, Archaeology and Trade: Further Observations on the Gao Region (Mali)* (Oxford, 2000).

[26]U. Freitag, '"Cosmopolitanism" and "conviviality"? Some conceptual considerations concerning the late Ottoman empire', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17 (2014), 375–91.

[27]U. Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Oakland, 2019), 1.

[28]On ethnic tensions and segregation as features of modern urban history more generally, see J. Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 2009), 410; Nightingale, *Segregation*, 296–305.

[29]On sweeping powers, see, for instance, D. Guignard, *L'abus de pouvoir dans l'Algérie coloniale (1880–1914): visibilité et singularité* (Nanterre, 2010), 168–72.

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Key interventions: long histories, volatile proximity and the centrality of the margins

Inhabiting, sharing and naming one's neighbourhood was no triviality, but rather a system of norms and memories that played a crucial role in the deeply asymmetrical encounter with colonial power. As Jennifer Hart shows in her article on Accra, the town was much more than merely a place of residence. Sharing urban space implied an intricate set of commitments, responsibilities and customs, which was binding on the one hand, but which also allowed Ga people migrating to the town to become part of its social fabric by adopting them. In a similar vein, Halimat Titilola Somotan delves into the history of the Epetedo neighbourhood in Lagos to challenge the still-prevalent scholarly view of 'European' vs 'native' zone – and indeed of Europeanness and indigeneity. As her rich article demonstrates, residents drew on a long history of migrating to and settling in the Lagos Bay and what would later become Epetedo to make claims about their right to land and participation. It is these long, pre-colonial histories of being neighbours that we must understand in order to discuss local reactions to the British colonial attempt to reshape the city and its social interactions.

Of course, highlighting the role of long histories applies to *colonized*, not *colonial* towns – that is, to places where colonial power encountered intricate built environments and social relations. Grasping the social condition of proximity in urban settings created by colonial authorities and settler communities presents its own set of challenges – particularly around the issue of heterogeneity and cross-communal interactions. In their study of Jewish–Muslim cohabitation in the town of Sétif in eastern Algeria, Monia Bousnina and Avner Ofrath explore the ambivalences of being neighbours in a town built by the French colonial authorities in the 1840s and 1850s. Though sharing everyday facilities and communal spaces in collective housing complexes, Jews and Muslims in Sétif did not have any pre-colonial history of being neighbours on which to draw. Their cohabitation defied the strict categories of religion and legal status created by colonial rule, yet they were limited in reach and fragile at times of political uncertainty and unrest. In a different case- study, Elia Etkin shows how the interplay of proximity and marginality forced residents to forge ties across the fault lines of religion, ethnicity and nationalism in the Jewish neighbourhoods of HaTikvah and Bat Galim in British Mandate Palestine, built in the 1920s and 1930s on the outskirts of Tel Aviv and Haifa, respectively. Occupying a peripheral position in relation to the emerging urban centres of European Jewish Zionism, the Jewish residents of these neighbourhoods were compelled to co-operate both with Arab Palestinian traders in the surrounding environment and with British authorities in economy and trade, often defying Zionist policies of 'Hebrew labour'. Such ties, however, were extremely susceptible to the escalating ethno-religious and political tension in the 1930s – and the clear-cut turning point of the 1948 war.

Proximity, marginality and precarity are therefore key categories for the study of social interactions in the colonial city. As Javed Iqbal Wani shows in his study of inner labour migration and industrial workers' militancy in the city of Kanpur in northern India, precarious living and working conditions were often what brought workers of different origins to form common political platforms. And as Michael Yeo shows in his study of Sandakan and Jesselton in North Borneo, even – indeed: especially – small colonial towns were marked by a high degree of heterogeneity as a result of colonial migration. These sites – often small port towns – at once created and regulated interactions across ethnic lines. Such interactions took place in clearly marked and well-guarded settings.

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Even within the colonial quest to shape urban space as a living ethnographic museum, local elements and small urban units could play a significant role. As Mikko Toivanen shows in his study of colonial celebrations in Batavia, neighbourhoods and districts outside the city centre were key in staging the assimilationist ambitions of the Dutch empire. Expanding the reach of colonial processions and celebrations beyond the city centre to include the residential districts of Chinese and Arab minorities allowed officials to present a character of colonial governance that incorporated different cultures of the city's population. Rather than spatial segregation, colonial ceremonies reproduced a complex set of cultural, spatial and of course legal hierarchies in the Dutch East Indies.

Conclusion

To consider urban proximity is to explore the intersection of colonial governance ambitions on the one hand and the lived experience of heterogeneous, unequal societies on the other. Thus viewed, the colonial city emerges not as a 'laboratory' or a surface for the projection of European ideas of modernity, but as a site of competing norms and practices of sociability, solidarity and political militancy. Taken together, the contributions in this collection highlight the limited reach of colonial urbanism – and of scholarship focusing on it. While 'master plans', 'zoning' or distinct 'sectors' certainly tell us a great deal about European colonial culture and thought, they tell us very little about the social reality of colonial cities.

It is by rescaling our unit of analysis and considering actual sites of encounter and agency that we can see what living in the colonial city meant for urban residents. It is here, in the intimate spaces of the street, the café or the shared courtyard that we find the stories that urban residents tell about their homes and weave into perceptions of time and space, thus turning the amalgamation of buildings into a meaningful unit of social, intellectual and cultural life. It is here, in everyday encounters across communal lines, that we can see the constantly present volatility of the colonial public sphere. And it is on the margins in small and remote urban units that we see what colonial urbanism was: an idea, a mythology, a system of symbols and representations that, ruthless though it was, was never powerful enough to shape society according to its fixed ideas.

Ultimately, this collection is but a first step, an exploration of what can be gained by delving into the social reality of living together in the colonial city. The more local expertise on and from formerly or currently colonial and colonized cities emerges, the better we are able to assess the dynamics of colonial policies on the one hand and bottom-up contestations and defiance thereof on the other.

Acknowledgments. This introduction and collection of essays emerged from the workshop 'Uneasy Neighbours: Conflict and Control in the Colonial City, 1870–1940', which was held at the University of Bremen in July 2022. We would like to thank the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for its generous support and the participants of the workshop for their comments and insights.

Cite this article: Ofrath, A. and Aselmeyer, N. (2026). Introduction: uneasy neighbours: proximity, sociability and difference in the colonial city, *c.* 1870–1940. *Urban History*, **53,** 32–40, doi:10.1017/S0963926825000136

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