Introduction
Marcos Bau Carvalho, Ilinca Diaconescu, and Julian Walker

This book explores how contested processes of urban development, and the rights of city dwellers, are understood and interpreted. It aims to do so, however, from the perspectives of women and men who are working in different ways at the urban grassroots on issues related to housing and spatial rights, as well as identity struggles around race, gender, disability, sexuality, citizenship and class.

This grassroots point of view should make a central contribution to the field in which academics and students engaging with issues of urban development and social justice work. However, while the lives and struggles of grassroots urban activists are often documented and analysed in academic literature, this is frequently through depictions and interpretations by academics rather than through making space for the voices and viewpoints of grassroots women and men themselves. Furthermore, while there is now a well-established field of participatory development research in which the people who are the objects of study are involved in research processes, such participatory research nonetheless still focuses generally on participants’ lives, experiences and opinions, but has less focus on their ideas and their analysis (i.e. their contribution to theory and to conceptual debates about urban development). Where such points of view are reflected in research they are often presented as ‘voices from the margin’ of the discipline. We would argue that these views and experiences should in fact lie at the heart of our field.

Privileging academic interpretations of development processes and of inequality has historically been justified on the basis that academic research can give a more objective and ‘scientific’ analysis of social processes. However, today this idea of the rational, neutral academic
is increasingly questioned. Furthermore, in recognizing the power dynamics inherent in the production of knowledge, there are concerns that over-emphasizing academic interpretations of the world can eclipse the views of the citizens whose experiences are under analysis. This is particularly the case where the citizens in question hold identities that are commonly marginalized or devalued. Clearly this is a major problem where the focus of research itself is the experience of inequality, and of having a subaltern identity.

Thus, while academic research undoubtedly has an important contribution to make in, for example, having access to spaces for wider, more systematic, analysis across specific spaces and experiences, this should not be the only interpretation of reality brought to the study of urban processes. In this vein, this volume aims to present the direct voices and interpretations of those involved (as activists and project workers) in grassroots struggles about identity rights and urban spaces. We hope that this can act as a resource for those studying urban development, meaning that in addition to drawing on and citing the views of academics, those working in the field can also cite actors from the grassroots.

In this light, the concrete aim of this project is to produce a series of narratives in which grassroots activists and professionals from two contexts explain how they understand and experience a number of development concepts, and choose a set of photographic images which they feel illustrates their approach to the concepts. The contexts from which the narratives are drawn are Salvador da Bahia in Brazil, and London in the UK, which, while very different in their histories, cultures and economies, are both characterized by growing inequality, and processes of gentrification and displacement, which create a number of common urban struggles.

By development concepts we mean the ideas that are used to structure the way that we see and understand the world and the processes of change happening within it. Such concepts have both a descriptive element (revealing how things are) and a normative element (proposing how things should be). They are important because they influence the kinds of interventions that are made – for example, in urban-development and city-governance processes. They are also paradigmatic, meaning that certain ideas and framings dominate in particular places, periods or disciplines. However, dominant conceptual framings frequently exclude the interpretations and values of women and men who exist outside the recognized spaces of knowledge production, such as universities, or who do not fit the ideal type of ‘knowledge producer’ or what they
should look like (expressed in terms of race, class, gender, ability and other such factors). This is problematic as development concepts from such privileged points of view will describe the world in a particular way from a particular point of view, and will make normative proposals based on a particular set of values.

The concepts addressed in this volume include some which are arguably paradigmatic in the field of urban development, including Lefebvre’s concept of the right to the city, and also concepts which are critical in shaping the normative framing of urban-development interventions (for example, the idea of the common good). The narratives also explore concepts proposed by the grassroots activists involved in the research, which may fall outside the mainstream academic conceptual terrain but are important and motivating concepts within grassroots work (for example, the concepts of hope, ubuntu, or the right to memory, which were selected by some of the interviewees).

The grassroots activists and professionals who have participated in the project were drawn from two networks that each bring together organizations and activists working around issues of spatial justice in their cities: Lugar Comum in Salvador da Bahia and Just Space and the Reclaim Our Spaces Coalition in London (more information about these networks is provided in the following sections). Both of these networks had an existing relationship with the students and academics involved in this project through ongoing research collaboration. In Brazil Lugar Comum conducted a shared research project with its network of students from the Federal University of Bahia and the MSc in Social Development Practice of the Development Planning Unit, University College London (UCL). Similarly in the UK, Just Space and its networks, including the Reclaim Our Spaces Coalition, is involved in an ongoing research collaboration with students of the MSc in Urban Development Planning of the Development Planning Unit, UCL.

This project worked with specific member organizations of these two networks in Brazil and London, comprising a wide range of groups, including combinations of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, protest groups, cultural organizations, and occupations of land and housing. The specific woman or man interviewed in each case was proposed by each of the groups involved. As described in the background for each case, the interviewees are either activists (mobilizing on behalf of their interest group in an unpaid capacity) or professionals (employed to support a particular group or struggle) or, in many cases, both at once.
As discussed above, this book draws on a research project structured around a series of interviews and a photographic project, conducted with grassroots activists and/or professionals. Each interview was structured around three concepts. In each case:

- One concept was selected by the interviewee. We asked the interviewees to discuss a concept that they see as core to their work, as a key idea/organizing principle of their group, or as one of the issues that they mobilize around or against.
- One concept explored by all of the interviewees was built around the idea of the right to the city. This is currently a key paradigmatic concept in academic fields relating to urban (in)equality. In London, members of the Just Space network argued that the terminology of the right to the city is not familiar to the grassroots groups in their network. They suggested that we instead use the term *reclaim our spaces* as a concept that is linked to the ideals of the right to the city but has also been used as a rallying principle in the Just Space networks, and is therefore an idea that the London
interviewees already have a clear stance on. In Brazil, on the other hand, we explicitly explored the term ‘right to the city’. This made sense as the interviewees were already familiar with the concept, which has been a key focus of Lugar Comum’s work. It focuses explicitly on wider Brazilian civil-society activism and has been enshrined in Brazilian human-rights laws such as the Statute of the Cities (2001).

- One concept in each interview was selected by students from University College London and the Federal University of Bahia who participated in the research. Students were asked to pick a concept that they would like to further explore from a distinctly grassroots perspective. In London, students from UCL’s MSc in Urban Development Planning and MSc in Social Development Practice attended a workshop on the research, during which they agreed on the Common Good as a concept that they would like all of the London interviewees to be asked to explore. In Brazil, students from UFBA and UCL were working together with the seven Brazilian organizations covered by this research in May 2017 (as part of an action research project with Lugar Comum). In this case each group of students defined a concept that they would like to have defined/explained by their partner organization.

The three concepts formed the basis of the discussion with the authors of the following sections about how they interpret each of these ideas and use (or don’t use) them in their work and campaigns.