What view might we gain of cities and the urban world if we look at them through the fragment? This is a book about fragments in the city. Or more accurately, about the relations fragments become caught up in and the ways in which they are used. Fragments not just as nouns but as verbs. Not just as things but as processes, doing different kinds of work, and sometimes in surprising ways. Fragments and their interactions, with residents, activists, artists, writers, and others. The fragment not only as a material entity but as a form of expression or a type of knowledge. I explore some of the diversity of thinking and acting with fragments in the city, and experiment with the fragment as a form of written expression. The relations formed around fragments can generate insight into what it means to be urban. They can help us to make sense of our increasingly urban world, and can become part of the possibilities of making and remaking the city.

As cities grow, they become increasingly unequal and fragmented. Much of what lower-income residents deal with on a daily basis is fragments of stuff: toilets that often seem to be broken or inadequate, water pipes that don’t keep their pressure or quality, houses that demand constant labor and maintenance, everyday objects that stress and fracture, and so on. Urban life, for a growing number of people across the world, is more and more about the struggle of managing infrastructure, housing, and services that are unreliable or unable to meet basic needs. What I call “fragment urbanism” is the interactions different people have with
fragments. It is a multiple and diverse process where bits and pieces of material things and forms of knowledge are caught up in all kinds of social and political relations, often oppressive and exploitative, sometimes progressive and generative.

As the world continues to urbanize, fragments are becoming more important. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme poverty had fallen globally, but in cities urban inequality rose. Somewhere between a third and a quarter of all urban residents live in poor neighborhoods—often called “slums,” or, less pejoratively, “informal” or “lower-income” neighborhoods—or in transit housing settlements, squats, refugee camps, and in the interstices of the city: under bridges and flyovers, on pavements and in lanes, or balanced precariously on riverbanks or the edges of garbage grounds. More and more of urban life, especially on the economic margins of cities, revolves around efforts to collectively and individually work with, put to work, and politicize fragments. In this sense, fragments are both at the margins and at the center, both seemingly trivial and often overlooked, yet vital for how the urban world is lived and politicized.

There are many routes through which to think about the fragment; in this book I pursue four. I decided that rather than focus on one form of the fragment, be it material, knowledge, textual expression, or otherwise, I would instead explore how different approaches to, and instantiations of, the fragment would enable a particular understanding of the making and remaking of urban worlds. This decision facilitated the bringing together of unlikely urban domains that are not often part of the same conversation about cities and the urban condition, from protests over infrastructure in Mumbai and Cape Town, or forms of urban support in Berlin and Kampala, to artistic collaborations in Los Angeles, and the potential of methods like writing or walking in London and Hong Kong to locate and express fragments of different sorts. The four different routes I settled on—often overlapping, sometimes distinct—constitute an expansive, albeit situated and necessarily limited, reading of fragment urbanism.

First, I explore how marginal material bits and pieces come to act in different ways in the city. These fragments are not theoretical questions or conceptual abstractions; they are lived as individual, social, and political struggles. They are intimately connected to experiences of health, dignity, and the possibilities of urban living. They compose homes that are too hot, cold, wet, or flimsy, or just too much work, as well as partial and inconsistent water, sanitation, or electricity provi-
sions that are linked to illness, disease, and injury. In the neighborhood of Topsia in Kolkata, for example, Jeremy Seabrook and Ahmed Siddiqui describe an urban fabric of bamboo and wood-frame housing, industrial discards, roofs weighted down by stones, raised beds or makeshift doorway dams to block monsoon floodwater, aging plastic cans for drinking water, and so on (Figure 1 is a different example from Mumbai, showing some of the everyday metals, bricks, cables, and containers that support housing and infrastructure). Fragmented homes and infrastructures, themselves the products of the political, economic, and cultural inequalities of the city, might break down, collapse, or—if they are on the wrong side of the law or the powers that be and their economic interests—be demolished altogether. At the same time, fragments can become enrolled in political contestation.
Second, I am concerned with how forms of urban material provision—a community toilet in a poor neighborhood, for example—which might start out life as a kind of “whole,” then become fragments in practice, whether because they are subject to breakdown and demand constant maintenance, or because they are often so woefully insufficient in comparison to need that even when they are well-built integrated systems they are, in practice, always already fragments of provision. Even in cases where provisions in poorer neighborhoods—energy, sanitation, water, drainage, or transport, for example—seem to be, at least initially, relatively well functioning, in practice they are too often far from it, unable to provide for enough of the residents enough of the time, poorly maintained by the state. These forms of the fragment are sometimes ambiguous, moving between “fragment” and “whole” over time. Density plays a role here. Not because, as conservative urban voices sometimes claim, it is “too high”: the issue is not one of optimum thresholds of numbers of people, but of the profound inequalities that force residents into marginalized, underprovided spaces in the city. Residents are often forced to struggle with overburdened fragments that barely cater to the numbers of people compressed into a small space. At the same time, densities of people become a resource to help people cope, or from which to form political formations that contest living conditions.

Third, I consider knowledge fragments—forms of knowledge, or ways of knowing, that are marginalized by dominant cultures, actors, groups, and power relations. The marginalization that increasingly accompanies world urbanization pertains not only to the realm of material stuff but to that of knowledge-forms and ways of knowing, from traces of historical memory and ongoing community festivals or art projects, to mapping projects or manifestos or alternative cultural imaginaries of a different urban future. Consider, for instance, whether the knowledges that lower-income residents have about how to manage and improve material fragments remains in the site—ignored, manipulated, or discarded by the powers that be in the city—or moves beyond the site to meaningfully influence policy and planning? Or, consider whether refugees from different spatial and cultural contexts, carrying with them their own histories, skills, aspirations, and concerns, have their knowledge and voice genuinely heard and responded to in city management?

Knowledge fragments are marked out as such in two broad ways. First, because of their position to or within a wider set of political, social, and cultural power-knowledge relations. Constructions of the
urban whole involve a set of power relations that can exclude, subordinate, or otherwise transform knowledge fragments. Second, because knowledge fragments can be forms of expression that present clues to different ways of understanding the urban condition and its possibilities. Knowledge fragments can be provocations that demand recognition that the world is more than simply plural, but—as Dipesh Chakrabarty has written—“so plural as to be impossible of description in any one system of representation.” The urban world as beyond any singular narrative or epistemology; to quote AbdouMaliq Simone, “multiple realities—visible and invisible . . . [through which] the urban is always ‘slipping away’ from us.”

Material fragments and knowledge fragments are often co-located. Edgar Pieterse, writing about cities in Africa, identifies “catalysts” for new directions in urban theory, policy, and practice from often marginalized spaces: “I have no doubt that the street, the slum, the waste dump, the taxi rank, the mosque and church will become the catalysts of an unanticipated African urbanism.” We might think of the “catalysts” here as forms of politics and ways of understanding cities beyond the more familiar referent points. Writing about urban wastepickers in municipal garbage grounds in India, for example, Vinay Gidwani suggests that theory could be enriched by attending more closely to the lifeworlds of wastepickers and their interconnections to relations of capital, labor, and urbanism, through what he calls a “conjuring of the positive” from what has been “marginalized, remaindered, and stigmatized” as a “primary intellectual and political task.”

The fourth and final way in which I use the fragment is as a form of written expression. The form of fragment writing deployed here, and I will explore this in more detail later, is expressed through vignettes of different lengths and kinds, from brief depictions and elicitations—often impressionistic rather than analytical—to, more commonly, longer descriptions and reflections on particular questions, themes, or cases, adding up to a set of juxtapositions across sites and issues.

By exploring these four uses of the fragment, I hope to tell a larger story—situated in my own angle of vision and told through a particular set of cases—about cities and the urban world. This is a story of people trying to cope with an inadequate and often unreliable urban fabric, striving to build and hold together vital forms of social infrastructure, developing political claims and approaches to contest their living conditions, and shaping political or artistic expressions that seek to escape or remake the fragments of the urban present.