

PRACTICES

Housing, dwelling, city, world: Towards an embedded philosophy. Interview with Philippe Simay¹

¹ The interview took place online on 14th November 2024. As part of the project dedicated to the historic city and urban aesthetics, the interviewers had the opportunity to speak with Professor Philippe Simay, to whom they express their gratitude, about the relationship between philosophy, aesthetics and the problem of dwelling. The starting point for the discussion was the documentary television programme *Habiter le monde*, produced for the Arte channel, the first two series of which were broadcast in 2016 and 2019 respectively.

Philippe Simay — Paris-Belleville School of Architecture — Contact: p.simay@free.fr

Andrea Borsari — Università di Bologna — Contact: a.borsari@unibo.it

Francesco Di Maio — Università di Bologna — Contact: francesco.dimaio6@unibo.it - fradimaio92@gmail.com

Claudia Nigrelli — University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI, Mendrisio) —
Contact: claudia.nigrelli@supsi.ch

ABSTRACT

This interview with philosopher Philippe Simay takes as its point of departure the television documentary series *Habiter le monde*, using it as a critical entry into broader reflections on inhabiting, urban aesthetics, and the historical city. Through this audiovisual project, Simay develops what he defines as an “embedded philosophy,” grounded in situated encounters with diverse architectural practices, forms of life, and material environments. The conversation situates inhabiting within a relational framework that connects bodies, spaces, and histories, challenging abstract and universalizing conceptions of the city. Particular attention is devoted to vernacular architecture, material resources, and practices of reuse, understood as socially and politically embedded processes that shape the aesthetic and ethical experience of urban and non-urban spaces alike. In dialogue with contemporary debates on the historical city, the interview proposes an understanding of history not as a static heritage but as a stratified and contested dimension of lived urban experience. The discussion also addresses public space and mediation, highlighting the epistemic role of images and audiovisual formats in articulating the sensory and temporal dimensions of inhabiting. Overall, the text contributes to critical frameworks in urban aesthetics by linking history, materiality, and lived experience within a non-instrumental conception of inhabiting today.

KEYWORDS

Dwelling; Urban aesthetics; Historical city; Materiality; Audiovisual mediation

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Francesco Di Maio. — Philippe Simay, you are a philosopher and lecturer at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville, with an interdisciplinary background in humanities and social sciences.

Your work has focused on experiences and representations of urban modernity based on the analyses of Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and László Moholy-Nagy. Among your publications, we would like to mention *Capitales de la modernité: Walter Benjamin et la ville*, published in 2005,² and the collection *Le Choc des métropoles: Simmel, Kracauer et Benjamin*, edited with Stéphane Füzesséry in 2008.³ More recently, in 2022, you published *La Ferme du Rail: Pour une ville écologique et solidaire*,⁴ and *Bâtir avec ce qui reste: Quelles ressources pour sortir de l'extractivisme?*⁵

In the past few years, your focus has shifted more towards the problematic field of urban ecology. The documentary series *Habiter le monde*, which you presented on the Arte television channel, and which was published in book form in 2019,⁶ reflects this interest.

It is precisely this current research that caught our attention as members of the Architectural Humanities group at the University of Bologna.⁷ First of all, would you like to tell us about your two latest books?

Philippe Simay — Of course. I wrote *La Ferme du Rail* with my wife, Clara Simay, because she is an architect and she was the one who carried out this project in Paris, which is now known as *La Ferme*. It is a wooden and straw building that houses people in great precariousness and now live and work on this urban farm.

Bâtir avec ce qui reste addresses the issue of the use of material resources in architecture, given the excessive consumption of non-renewable raw materials in this field. It deconstructs the notion of "natural resources" to show that natural resources do not really exist. Resources are always cultural constructions; they reflect the way societies relate to their environment. I take this criticism of mass extraction to the point of saying: now, we no longer take anything, we only use what is already there, what is already available. The entire last part of the book is therefore a reflection on reuse, saying that with *re-use*, we only use what we have already produced. So, it is a critique of extractivism and a defense of reuse.⁸

2 Philippe Simay (dir.), *Capitales de la modernité: Walter Benjamin et la ville* (Paris, éclat, 2005).

3 Id. et Stéphane Füzesséry (dir.), *Le Choc des métropoles: Simmel Kracauer, Benjamin* (Paris, éclat, 2008).

4 Clara Simay et Philippe Simay, *La Ferme du Rail: Pour une ville écologique et solidaire*, préf. Baptiste Lanaspeze (Paris, Actes Sud, 2022).

5 Philippe Simay, *Bâtir avec ce qui reste: Quelles ressources pour sortir de l'extractivisme?* (Vincennes, Terre Urbaine, 2024).

6 Id. et Clotilde Meyer, *Habiter le monde* (Paris, Actes Sud/Arte, 2019).

7 In this regard, see their website: <https://site.unibo.it/architecturalhumanities/it>.

8 See Simay, "Ne plus rien prendre à la Terre," in *Bâtir avec ce qui reste*, 69-100.

Claudia Nigrelli. — It seems to me that your book continues the reflections already addressed in *Habiter le monde*. How did the *Habiter le monde* project come about and how did the transition from your theoretical and philosophical training to this project of scientific dissemination for the general public take place?

Ph.S. — The starting point is quite complex, because I began the series in 2014, but before that I had been teaching philosophy for a long time and had given very different courses, notably on the question of “what does it mean to inhabit?,” based on Martin Heidegger, Benjamin and other authors.

I live in Paris, in the 19th arrondissement. Migrants have settled in my neighborhood. There were up to a thousand people on the street, on an avenue just behind my house, and also along the road that took me to the École de Paris-Belleville where I teach. It was an extremely difficult situation for me, because I went to school every day to talk about the philosophies of dwelling, and I saw these people, often with the police tearing down or gassing their tents. And my children, who were young at the time, had a lot of questions. After a while, I didn't know what to tell my children, I didn't know what to tell my students. I thought to myself, “I can't teach these classes on what it means to live somewhere when I no longer even understand how I myself live, and how these people who should be there temporarily have been there for weeks.” One day, I found myself distributing meals with charities, most of which were religious, which surprised me a lot at the time. From then on, I went through a kind of existential crisis where I no longer really understood what I was doing as a teacher.

It was at that very moment that I was contacted by television producers who had seen me in lectures on YouTube and were looking for someone to make documentaries about dwelling. I told them: “I don't want to make a documentary about housing (*habitat*), I want to make a documentary about dwelling (*habiter*). What does ‘dwelling’ mean?” I wanted to start from this mixture of sadness, anger and incomprehension, which is rich material for philosophical questioning and discovering the world.

So, the series was decided in a dialogue between the producer, the production teams, and me. We said, “We'll start with housing, and then we'll tackle the question of dwelling.” They put me through a series of tests, and they were quite happy to have a philosopher on board. The two people responsible for broadcasting these programs for the Arte television channel also wanted philosophy, but not too much for a mainstream program. For six months, we tried to define the right positioning, my ability as a philosopher to say things. It was a very difficult balance to strike, because these programs fit into specific categories. This one is called the “*case découverte*” (litt. the discovery box): it's a very short format, 26 minutes. You have to make people dream, show them incredible places, often on the other side of the world. I filmed in Austria and Italy, but mostly outside

of Europe. We had to appeal to all audiences. The idea we wanted to convey had to be very simple and understandable: one or two quotes, a few references, not too many concepts. I still had some freedom in how I told the story and defined the message I wanted to convey.

At first, I felt a certain amount of frustration. After filming the first few episodes, I felt a bit like I was betraying my discipline and also betraying architecture. I wasn't happy. But I was wrong. When these films were broadcast, I saw how much they were watched, not only by the general public, but also by an audience specializing in architecture and urban planning. Many students and teachers had seen the series, which was also shown in architecture schools and used as teaching material. This made me think a lot about the value of this type of television production, which is quite far removed from the academic world. It led me to believe that today, it is really necessary to transform the formats through which we communicate as academics. We are no longer in the "*Trente Glorieuses*," that period of economic and social development in France, which ended long ago. We live in a more unstable and porous world where we seek to have a greater impact on society. How can we find new ways of writing and communicating? This style of television communication is interesting.

Moreover, after *Habiter le monde*, I made two more personal 52-minute films in which I still appeared on screen. The first is called *L'Appel du Grand Nord*, which is a journey across the Yukon in the Canadian Far North in winter.⁹ The other is called *La Route du bout du monde*, which is a journey across Argentine Patagonia.¹⁰ And now I'm writing a film about concrete around the world, about the ecological issues surrounding concrete.

So, I continued to move towards the medium of film, which allows me to tell stories in a very succinct way, necessarily simpler and clearer—perhaps not deeper, but clearer—and also to work with the language of images, which has a very unique power today. In these latest films, I talk more and the ideas come freely. This register has allowed me to communicate in a much more sensitive, much more emotional way.

For example, in these two 52-minute documentaries, I talk about myself, I talk about how I feel. So, it's a mixture of philosophical consideration but expressed in a very personal and sensitive way. It would be much more difficult, if not impossible, in a strictly academic register. I found it interesting to see that I could express very intimate things that also have a more general significance. At least, that's what I try to believe: expressing what is most unique and intimate can touch a lot of people.

It allowed me to exist in a different way, personally and intellectually, and to express ideas in a different way, which I couldn't have done in an

9 *L'Appel du Grand Nord* (France, 2020) was written by Christophe Cousin and Matthieu Maillet and directed by the latter.

10 *Patagonie, La Route du bout du monde* (France, 2023) was written by Emilie Dumond and directed by Matthieu Maillet.

academic format, or even in a newspaper column. Now, I want to write something very critical about the concrete industry, and in this case, I prefer to stay behind the camera. It's no longer about beautiful images for the 'case découverte,' but a social documentary involving investigative work.

In fact, several academics have written for the channel in recent years. They don't direct the film themselves; there is a director, but they write the entire script and text, particularly on major environmental issues. So, I'm not the first to do this; there have been others before me. I believe it meets a need: a demand from the general public, but also an academic need, linked to the dissatisfaction of not being sufficiently disseminated in our field. Even our academic publications reach few readers.

F.D.M. — What is remarkable about *Habiter le monde* is that it is the first example of a "philosophical documentary," in the sense that its character is specifically philosophical and it is a documentary that openly uses philosophy. How does *Habiter le monde* fit into this genre? Were you inspired by other documentaries?

Ph.S. — No, I wasn't really inspired by other documentaries. However, it was part of a series of programs on Arte in which they used professionals to "embody"—that's what they call people who come from civil society, not television professionals, and who embody the subjects. For example, they might take a doctor for a program on medicine around the world. In this case, they took a philosopher.

I asked myself, "But what does it mean to take a philosopher? How can I do these programs as a philosopher?" Not as a teacher, not for my job, but how does philosophy change the way we think and communicate? Initially, I prepared the films with a lot of questions and writing before filming. I realized that this was actually preventing me from filming the episodes to the best of my ability. When I was face to face with people or in places, there were things I really wanted to say, but I always had to think about how to fit in my concept, my phrase, my reference, my 'great idea,' etc. So, I changed my approach.

Initially, I was the one who chose the destinations and defined the angle of approach for the film. For example, I would say: "We're going to go to Papua, and there we're going to focus on this issue, that issue..." I would list the questions. Then I decided to stop this advance preparation and to arrive on site to practice a kind of "embedded" philosophy (*philosophie embarquée*), a "field" philosophy: everything that was going to be said, everything that was going to be thought would be the result of situations and encounters.

At a certain point, I refused to prepare any further. I chose the destination, explained why it was important, gave the team some background information, and then made myself entirely available of the situation. It was much more interesting from a human perspective, but also from an intellectual

one: something really does emerge from the uniqueness of the situations we find ourselves in. Of course, this draws on pre-existing knowledge—I never start from scratch. I draw on everything I know and everything I am, but in a much more spontaneous way. Visually and cinematically, it was already more interesting; humanly, the interactions were richer and, I believe, more accurate. It creates a kind of horizontality, leaving room to be troubled, saddened, angry, confused, or amazed. I didn't have a specific model, but I thought about it a lot, and my method changed over time. It also allowed me to discover things I hadn't thought of before. I learned lessons from this series, and these experiences led me to my later work on ecological architecture.

Andrea Borsari. — One of the most interesting things about this series is the exploration of very different realities in search of alternatives to those that prevail in the Western world. Looking back on this experience, could you point to some concrete solutions that you discovered that you feel are representative of this “embedded” philosophy? For example, in terms of resource protection or renewal, the environment, social issues, improving well-being, etc.

Ph.S. — Yes, there are several things to say. The starting point was linked to a desire to discover “vernacular” architecture, so-called “traditional” architecture, at a time when I felt that the architectural language and rationality developed in Europe and North America were very poor, or at least rather impoverished. I was interested in both the aesthetics of the vernacular and the technical and construction expertise found all over the world. The first thing that struck me was that everyone has something to say about what it means ‘dwell.’ I didn't expect that. I really travelled everywhere—I made 30 films, so I visited many destinations—and each time, ordinary people had a lot to say about what it means to live.

And I saw that the way they think about dwelling is often more complex, more substantiated, more diverse than ours. That made a big impression on me. For example, in West Africa, in Togo and Burkina Faso, earth construction is a total social phenomenon: it involves religious issues, technical and intergenerational transmission, gender, symbolism and political organization. Everyone participates in the construction. It's so complex. It's not just “building with earth:” it's an extraordinary social and technical process.

Here, on the contrary, building sites are closed to the public. We have technical expertise, but that's all. Earth, or any other material, is never “just” a material: it always has a social and political dimension. It refers to ways of being together. This is something we should cultivate more, because, in the best of cases, when we are involved in ecological architecture, we talk a lot about materials, but not about their social dimension. There are no materials without a supply chain, there are no materials without the transmission of know-how. That's one of the points I took away from this.

Another point that struck me was that many societies are driven by deep ecological concerns, even in very poor or disadvantaged societies. There is a real concern for environmental issues, and that comforted me greatly at a time when I was going through a difficult period, full of self-doubts. Seeing this shared awareness of environmental issues was comforting.

To fully answer your question, what struck me most was seeing that societies can have complex relationships with living beings that they use as building materials. For example, in Western ecological architecture, we say: "We're going to build with wood or straw, because it's a carbon sink and creates healthy environments..." But no one asks the question of the moral relationships we have with the trees or plants we exploit.

On the other hand, in several very remote places, I saw men and women caring for the living beings they exploited. Trees, bamboo and reeds were cut down, but there was respect, attention, consideration and sometimes even a form of devotion towards these living materials. The same applies to the animal world. In our country, animals are either pets—my cat, for example, has a medical certificate and a small passport with his photo, and is considered a member of the family—or they are meat. In the rest of the world, there is a whole range of extremely complex attitudes towards animals. Take horses or dogs: horses can be almost deified, used for their pulling power, for riding, depicted or eaten; dogs can be domesticated, provide services, and sometimes be eaten, as I have seen in West Africa.

What interests me is this range of attitudes that connects humans to the living world. It is not a sacralization of life. It is not a question of saying: "these living beings are sacred; we do not touch them." We can have very complex relationships with them, which involve cutting them up to use them as materials. This means that men and women can have complex, rich, and nuanced relationships with their environment that cannot be reduced to an instrumental relationship. One of the common features of all these vernacular architectures, to return to the question of resources, is that the inhabitants have a very clear idea of the material ecosystem in which they live.

If you look at vernacular architecture, for example in Italy or France, people knew very well what they had around them and how much of these resources they could take. In an alpine region, when building a wooden house, people knew how many trees they could cut down, when to do so, and if they took too many, there was social sanction. This was evidence of collective resource management, something we no longer have.

Today, we are completely disconnected from our material environments. If I look at this room where I am, I am unable to say where the sand used for the concrete comes from, where the aggregates come from, or where the bauxite used to make the aluminum in my furniture comes from, and where this bauxite was transformed into alumina... I have absolutely no idea. What we see is that in all these regions of the world where there is

vernacular architecture, inhabitants have a very keen awareness of the ecosystem in which they live, both in terms of the living beings and the materials that compose it. The interactions are much stronger.

For example, when I went to visit the Papuans, in the middle of a huge forest, it took me a while to understand that they didn't want to cut down trees. Wood is an abundant resource, so that's not the problem. Conserving or managing the resource makes no sense in this context, as the forest is enormous. They refuse to cut down trees because they live in the forest: they live with the trees.

This raises the question: how do we coexist with trees, living with them and sometimes cutting them down? This is something that does not exist in our society: forms of attachment and connection with the environment that we should be able to develop, particularly in the practice of ecological architecture.

A.B. — I have another question, still about the series *Habiter le monde*, from Elena Girelli, another member of *Architectural Humanities*, who is currently conducting doctoral research on the relationship between the city and audiovisual media. I'll read it out:

The different episodes of the series follow a fairly recurring pattern, articulated between two points of view: the bird's-eye view of life as a whole, and the details, with the entry into the private space of a specific dwelling. The effect is almost like alternating between zooming in and out, macro/micro, from the almost abstract cartographic city to the specific, concrete, almost individual space inhabited by a house or an interior. How do you see this choice of viewpoints, which sometimes seems to leave little room for the inhabitants? The camera does not move around the city but rather looks in from the outside or enters a particular place. What image of the city do you want to construct with this documentary? What relationship do you think exists between the city as a cartographic or urbanistic whole and the city as a home?

Ph.S. — Well, there are two answers. The first is that those are production choices imposed by the channel. With the development of drones, it is easy to produce extraordinary aerial images: high-angle shots, tracking shots... Drones are inexpensive and allow you to take incredible shots. At one point, the channel said, "I want drones." But this alternation of viewpoints is, in my opinion, very relevant. I was interested in having this view from above: what do we perceive on this scale, the city as an urban or built/natural ecosystem, as among the Papuans or in the mountains where I filmed? And how does this translate on a micro scale, in individual practice?

I was very interested in this because I am a great reader of Michel de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, there is a chapter called "Walking in the City" where he contrasts the city seen from above, with its maps,

plans, *master plans* and their way of rationalising space, with the city rewritten and designated by pedestrians with their practices.¹¹

I was therefore very interested in the macro/micro alternation. There aren't necessarily many urban shots in my films, due to filming constraints. The camera often shows people, I talk to someone, we see that person and me, but the practice itself takes up less space. What interested me was seeing how, on a micro scale, individuals define their relationship to "home" and on a larger scale, often linked to proxemics, even though they never have the overview that a drone provides: an almost divine point of view.

C.N. — How did you choose or meet the people you filmed? Was it first the choice of location, then the search for individuals, or the other way around, a story they might have wanted to tell you?

And then, it seems to me that there is a fairly important educational aspect to this project, particularly in relation to ecological issues. How was this aspect addressed directly or indirectly?

Ph.S. — Well, for the first question, what happens is that to build an episode, we first arrive at a destination. We have to decide: OK, I want us to go to this place, to see this thing. And if I show a building or a place, it has to be visually impressive, because a film is first and foremost about images.

Then I define the angle, the issues that are important to me, the themes I want to talk about, etc. Then I talk to a "fixer," which is someone on the ground, who will conduct an investigation. They meet the inhabitants, talk to them, and come back to me: "I met a 55-year-old woman, she does this, she does that, we talked about such and such a subject." And I reply, "Oh yes, that's interesting, I hadn't thought of that." That's how we build things, back and forth. Sometimes I also have very specific questions, and the person on site asks the residents: she watches how they respond, whether it's easy or not. And if it's not easy, it's complicated, because when you arrive with the cameras, you have to speak into a microphone, with people around... it's very unsettling.

Above all, films take a long time to make: some shots have to be redone several times. People think that once they've told you something, it's over and they can go home. But often you have to start again two, three, five times—which is very difficult for them. It was difficult for me too, but it's my job. So, there you have it: the more people you find who want to talk, the easier it is. That's how you build the story...

Sometimes nothing you imagined works: people don't show up, or they're not in the state you expected. For example, I went to India, to Varanasi,

11 See Michel de Certeau, "Marches dans la ville," in *L'Invention du quotidien, I, Arts de faire* (1980), dir. Luce Giard (Paris, Gallimard, 1990), 139-164; en. trans. Steven F. Randall, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984), 91-110, and 218-221.

and I was supposed to meet a clergyman. But he seemed to have taken drugs, probably for ritual purposes, and his words were very difficult to follow. It was just not possible to film with him. So, we had to improvise, find someone else, and carry on.

As for your second point, ecological issues: I was the one who brought them up a lot. It was a guideline that I wanted to defend systematically. But it's a struggle, because the production company or the channel might say, "Right, enough with always talking about ecological issues, That's not all." And they're right. We need to find different ways of approaching these themes: through social issues, the environment, materials, expertise, thermal comfort, insulation, heat, cold... You have to find angles that allow you to talk about it without coming across as obsessive. But for me, that was my only motivation. I thought to myself: if I make a film for a very wide audience, with an appealing product—we travel to the other side of the world, we discover extraordinary or very surprising buildings, surprising people—well, that's where we can get the message across. And I saw that it worked, because a lot of people talked to me about it.

C.N. — You talk a lot about "interiors" in the series, interiors that, I feel, strongly influence your idea of dwelling, at least when watching the series. This question, it seems to me, is very present in contemporary French philosophy, which revolves around the idea of dwelling as "*chez soi*," as to be "at home": a home that is obviously always connected to a shared space, but which also remains a home in the sense of a private space. So, what connection have you made with the concept of public space? Do you think this concept of "public space" can extend beyond the context in which it was formed—that is, the context of European culture?

Ph.S. — Well, there are two aspects to your question. The first is that it's true: the core around which the film is organized is houses and living in them. So, each time, it starts from something intimate. But depending on the episode, we discover that dwelling in a house is not necessarily an intimate space. For example, among the Papuans—and this is something I perhaps understood after the fact—they don't dwell in their tree houses. They dwell *the forest*. Similarly, among the Toraja people in Indonesia, dwelling means *cohabiting with the dead*. Some even say—and this was the case in the episode—that they dwell in wooden houses shaped like boats. But in reality, they don't dwell there at all: behind them, a few hundred meters away, they have shacks made of modern materials. I said to them, "But come on, that's nonsense, you don't dwell in the houses you're talking about!" And they replied, "Yes, we *stay* here, but we *live* in the other house." Even if the body is not physically present in these houses, their spirit, their being, resides there. They therefore completely dissociate *dwelling* or *living* from staying. That's not in the Heideggerian sense, but truly in the sense of their culture. For other societies, living means living *with*: living with plants, with animals, living in the mountains... When I went

to the North Pole, to a scientific base, what interested me was seeing how scientific activity made us inhabit a territory. It's not about being in uninteresting houses where scientists sleep. Their way of inhabiting the territory is through scientific research. So yes, it starts with houses and intimacy, but it's to show that there are many different ways of inhabiting, which can be completely dissociated from the house or even from intimacy.

As for public spaces, I haven't really looked into the status of public space, nor how we in Europe conceive of it. But it is clear that public space—in its philosophical definition inherited from Jürgen Habermas, as a space for publicization, i.e. for making things public,¹² and in its architectural, geographical or urbanistic definition as green spaces, streets, parks and squares—is in any case a highly situated cultural production. In Middle Eastern and Near Eastern cultures, the definitions and practices of public space are completely different.

I would have liked to explore these issues further, but as you said earlier, Andrea, the urban dimension is not very present in the series, precisely because everything revolves around homes and intimacy. So: what does it mean to live the street? What does it mean to experience urban space? These are questions that are not really explored. Firstly, because very few episodes actually take place in cities: one in Hanoi, one in Milan, one in Tokyo... and I think that's it. These are the limitations of this type of program, which is quite formulaic, where ultimately we find the same structure in each episode: I change countries, it's a new place, new people, different questions, but it's always "Philippe goes to Peru," "Philippe today in China," etc.

A.B. — A format somewhat like Tintin?

PH.S. — Exactly, it's the Tintin format. Even though, in Tintin, the adventures are more varied—I'm joking, of course—but yes, it's a bit of a constraint.

F.D.M. — As I mentioned at the beginning, our research group is conducting a project devoted to the '*città storica*', the 'historical city,' in the sense of the relationship between the city and the multiple and conflicting developments of its historicity—in the plural, therefore.¹³ However, the documentary series *Habiter le monde* is perhaps closer to a geographical than a historical vision, to use a macro-distinction between disciplines. And when we try to analyze the question of inhabiting, there are instances such as tradition or projections of the future—joyful, positive, but also traumatic and anxiety-laden. So, my question is: in your discipline, how does the problematization of history intervene in the lifestyles and forms

12 See Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (1962) (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 19902); en. trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989).

13 See Ilaria Cattabriga et al. (eds.), *The Historical City: A Critical Reference and Role Model* (Cham, Springer, 2025).

of living with which you have been in contact?

Ph.S. — For the series? Not really, actually. This question of historicity, or the relationship to the past, was present in some episodes more than others. In West Africa, yes, clearly, everything was really focused on the ways in which techniques and know-how were transmitted. But there was no particularly conflictual dimension.

On the other hand, these are issues that I tried to address in certain countries: in Vietnam, for example—where there were political issues—in Cuba, in China, and a lot in Myanmar. And each time, it was very complicated: it didn't really work. So, these are things that ultimately didn't appear in the final edit at all. For two reasons. Firstly, because the channel didn't really want to go into issues it considered to be "social". Whereas, for example, Papua is divided into two parts: the Indonesian side and the Papua New Guinea side. And on the Indonesian side, the Papuans are literally being slowly exterminated. There have been countless murders in the forests, due to mining and logging. They are trying to drive the Papuans out. There is a military junta in the forest, committing systematic murders and rapes. There is even an aids epidemic in the Papuan forest areas. These are absolutely tragic issues, and I was unable to talk about them at all in the film.

Yet the whole team made an endless journey to reach the Papuan camps—almost four days without stopping—and what we saw was one of the saddest sights of my life: situations of human desolation, the famous schools supposed to 'civilize' the Papuans, where zombie-like people live... There was a lot of violence along the way: gold miners, soldiers... You never know what might happen to you. And all of that, all of the conflict surrounding the forest as an inhabited territory is completely absent from the documentary.

So yes, it's one of the frustrations I've had when making this kind of film. That's why now, as an author, I'm turning to another format, a truly "societal" one, so that I can say things as they are. But saying things as they are doesn't mean we'll reach more people. *Habiter le monde* still reaches a very wide audience. But it's true that these issues aren't addressed, which is obviously a shame, because it would be a much more dynamic element in understanding: what remains of the past? What shapes the present? What elements are likely to open up multiple futures? These could be very interesting themes to explore.

C.N. — I feel that here we are entering more into the philosophical reflections that also anticipated the series and guided your work. This questioning of lifestyles through architecture reminds me of the French tradition, not widely studied today, known as social morphology. I'm thinking of authors such as Émile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs, Marcel Mauss... The idea was that studying the relationship between society, environment and material structures would enable us to understand how societies

represent themselves, something specific to their structure. In relation to architecture, I had in mind Mauss's essay on the Eskimos;¹⁴ otherwise, the other possible avenue was to broaden the scope to include the ethnography of the surrounding world—that is, the plurality of living worlds, the *Umwelten* in von Uexküll, for example. Do you see yourself in this?

Ph.S. — Oh yes, 100%. In fact, I spent two years at Philippe Descola's Social Anthropology Laboratory. My PhD thesis really straddles the boundary between philosophy and anthropology.¹⁵ The unofficial supervisor of my thesis, incidentally, is an anthropologist: officially it's a philosophy thesis, but the person who really trained me is an anthropologist. His name is Gérard Lenclud: an anthropologist who was also close to Claude Lévi-Strauss. And I was in that laboratory, Lévi-Strauss's laboratory, when he was still alive, too. He came once a week; it was very impressive.

But yes, what interests me is the relationship that societies have with their material environment. How they define their way of living, how they represent what it means to "dwell" through their interactions—first with a material environment, and then, of course with non-human worlds. These are things that interest me greatly. But as I teach at an architecture school, for me, the relationship with the non-human involves the question of material resources.

It is not the human/non-human relationship that interests me in the first place: rather, it's more a question of whose job it is to transform their material environment. So: how do other societies transform their material environment? With what techniques? How do these techniques connect us to the world in a certain way, allowing us to represent it?

For André Leroi-Gourhan, for example, these are fundamental questions. They are addressed through technique, more so than in Bruno Latour's work: all his reflections on ecosystems of objects, actors, actants... I find that interesting, but for me, it's really about how we transform materials, how materials transform us, how they enable us to understand the way we inhabit an environment.

A.B. — You have clearly explained to us that, on your personal journey, there was a kind of crisis in the idea of working solely on theoretical perspective, or on a vision that did not confront the direct experiences of urban planning, etc. However, when reading your work, I was very interested in your idea—the one you express in the introduction to the book you wrote with Stéphane Füzesséry, *Le Choc des métropoles*—of "sensitive

14 See Marcel Mauss, Henri Beuchat, "Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés: Eskimos Étude de morphologie sociale," *Année Sociologique* 9 (1904-1905): 39-132; reprinted in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris, puf, 1950), 387-475. See also Margaret Ione Fett, *A translation and an appraisal of Essay on seasonal variations of Eskimo societies (Année sociologique, 1905) by M. Mauss, with the collaboration of H. Beuchat*, Thesis, Monash University, 2022.

15 Philippe Simay, *Tradition et contestation: Éléments pour une éthique de la transmission*, doctoral thesis, University of Paris Nanterre, 2006.

theories of modernity”.¹⁶ It is the idea of getting closer to sensory experience, which in turn modifies the human sensory apparatus. This idea of close connections between sensory experience and theory is another form of morphology—not the same as the one Claudia mentioned, which comes from the French tradition of anthropology, ethnography, the laboratory of Descola, Lévi-Strauss, Mauss, etc. It is rather a German tradition, that of Simmel, Kracauer, Benjamin, where this relationship is very strong. So, my question is: to what extent do you think this approach is still adequate for understanding the reality of today’s cities? And to what extent has this concept been conveyed in the television series you directed? In particular: to what extent have visual representation and documentary formats enabled you to convey the sensory experience of the reality of living there? That’s really the question: the link between this German tradition of morphologies—which goes back to Georg Simmel—and the way in which this connection between sensory reality, theory and perception has influenced, or not, your work on the series and, more generally, your work on what you very aptly call an *embedded* philosophy. I think that could even be the title of our interview.

Ph.S. — I was interested in this urban ecology of the sensory, where ultimately the city was an ecosystem in which there were strong interactions between the material environment, but also the ecosystem of objects, and the ways of feeling and experiencing things. I’m still interested in the idea. What I find remarkable about these three authors—Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin—is their ability to pay attention to the singularity of objects and practices, and to show how, between the ways of feeling and the ways of using these objects, there is ultimately a form of adequacy. We see the emergence of adaptive capacities in individuals, or even the development of new skills.

Obviously, what they wrote at the end of the 19th century and up until the end of the 1930s remains relevant today. For example: how can we account for the transformations linked to digital technology? How can we understand what the generic city is today? Well, we need to conduct the same type of investigation as they did. How does our use of smartphones enable us to develop new skills that help us adapt to a rapidly changing world? In the era of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin, the central concept—as I tried to show in the book, but this is obviously open to debate—was that of “shock”. I don’t think this concept is still relevant for understanding contemporary cities and megacities. The concept of “flow” seems to work much better today. But the type of questioning remains valid: questioning the logic of flow, the interactions between individuals and the physical environment, etc.

16 Füzesséry and Simay, “Une théorie sensitive de la modernité,” in *Le Choc des métropoles*, 13-51.

What also remains very relevant today is the importance of the image. The idea that there is such a thing as education through images, which we find even before Benjamin, in László Moholy-Nagy. He was the first to say that tomorrow's illiterate will be those who cannot read images.¹⁷ And we can clearly see from the reception of his works that this was not understood: when *Painting, Photography, Film*¹⁸ or *The New Vision* were republished in France,¹⁹ they were often read as books in which the text was predominant, whereas they are above all books of images, with fundamental visual material that needs to be analyzed, interpreted, 'read.'

These works have clearly transformed the way I view the world of images and what images can bring us. I had the opportunity to work for Arte, which was a privileged experience, collaborating with high-caliber colleagues. If I had to start over today, I think I would do something on YouTube instead. It's formats like these that interest me now. I also think that if Moholy-Nagy were writing today, he would be writing on TikTok or YouTube, or on all these new platforms where anyone can produce and distribute content.

I believe that academics should invest in these spaces. Of course, there's a lot of nonsense out there, but there are also young people who are passionate about philosophy, law and social issues, and who produce impressive content. When you look at the number of views, it's fascinating. For me, lecturers and researchers need to be present on these platforms and invent new ways of communicating. I don't think this devalues intellectual work: these are simply other modes of expression that we need to learn to master.

F.D.M. — The last question is decidedly aesthetic, in reference to what you said about your work on Simmel. Sensation, perception, stimulus. The body as an extended entity, but also as a place of translation, and finally as a surface for inscription. What is the role of the body, or of corporeality in general, in *Habiter le monde* and also in your latest research?

Ph.S. — I will answer you as honestly as possible. It has taken on more and more importance, but rather through personal or intimate experience. Indeed, like you, I am an intellectual. I was mainly taught to sit behind a chair and think primarily with my brain, without using my body. And even though I later became a specialist in Kracauer and Benjamin—who

17 László Moholy-Nagy, "fotografie ist lichtgestaltung," *Bauhaus* 2, no. 1 (January 1928): 5; en. trans. "Photography is Creation with Light," in Kristina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (New York, Thames-Hudson, 1985), 303: "The illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as of the pen [nicht der schrift-, sondern der fotografie-unkundige wird der analfabet der zukunft sein]." The lowercase letters are present in the original German.

18 Id., *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (München, Langen, 1925, 19272); en. trans. Janet Seligman, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1969).

19 Id., *Von Material zu Architektur* (München, Albert, 1929); en. trans. Daphne M. Hoffman, *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture* (New York, Breuer Warren-Putnam, 1930); rev. and exp. ed. *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist* (New York, Wittenborn, 1947); fr. trans. by Jean-Léon Muller, *Du matériau à l'architecture*, préf. Stéphane Füzesséry et Philippe Simay (Paris, la Villette, 2015).

wrote extensively on *flânerie*—I always continued, through them, through phenomenology, through reading Bachelard, to be preoccupied with this question of the body. It was omnipresent. But in reality, it was always my brain that thought about the body, that thought *in place of* the body.

And in fact, this series was a real experience of the body. An experience of the body first of all because, physically, it was very difficult. For four years, I was involved in pre-production, production and post-production: imagining the films, going off to shoot them, coming back, editing, recording the commentary, then starting on the next one. And as soon as I got back, I worked. I didn't stop teaching either—I continued to teach, and I also continued to work in architectural firms. So, I worked non-stop, I travelled non-stop. I left at least every month and a half. I was constantly on the move. And it was physically exhausting. The journeys were also very long: you have to take buses, cars, canoes, cross markets... And after a while, my body started to dictate the pace. That was completely new to me, very unsettling. As I was saying earlier, the fact of no longer preparing anything, of letting the body and the senses become the interface from which everything is decided: it was really a turning point.

In the end, this question of the body wasn't a subject of theoretical reflection at the outset; it was more of a lived experience, almost in spite of myself, but one that showed me how much we think with our bodies. For example: sleeping anywhere. It sounds silly, but sleeping in completely incongruous places helped me a lot in making this series—sleeping on the floor, sleeping in the middle of a forest, sleeping in all kinds of places simply because I couldn't take it anymore. I realized how much my body produced forms of knowledge despite myself. And that was very liberating, especially for someone like me, who remains an intellectual in the sense that it's my brain that gets going first. I deeply regret that. This series healed me. You have to work hard on yourself, yes.

AB. — This perception of your physical experience raises the question of the relationship between the body and intellectual work, which is always a difficult one to articulate. One last question from me: about your future work. You mentioned this project on concrete. Do you have any other projects, whether books, research or audiovisual productions? Anything you'd like to mention?

Ph.S. — Yes. I am working on two very different books. The first focuses on what I call "hegemonic materials," borrowing a term from Antonio Gramsci: what explains why certain materials have become dominant on a global scale? Basically, industrial materials from the late 19th century. And what do these hegemonic materials do to other materials? I'm writing this book with Armelle Choplin, Professor of Geography at the University of Geneva and specialist in cement in West Africa, who has worked on the spread of cement. But the book will cover many other materials.

The second book is more personal—I'm really at the very beginning—and

it's about gathering, gleaning, ragpickers. I use these three figures as inspiration to think about another way of doing architecture. What would an architecture of gathering be? How can we think of the architect as a *chiffonnier*-man, someone who picks up what no one else wants, here and there? There is a poetic and political dimension to this, to thinking about what non-oppressive architecture could be. I am increasingly struck by the violent nature of this profession—in studies, in the way it is taught, but also in the way it is practiced. I don't know what the situation is like in Italy, but in France it is not enviable. The agency is often a place where forms of violence are practiced, and, of course, the construction site is a place of social and racial violence. How can a profession that brings together so much knowledge and know-how become a hotbed of violence—against oneself, against others, against the environment?

So, what elements could we highlight in order to imagine a non-violent, non-oppressive architecture? It is through these figures of gleaners, gatherers and ragpickers that I am trying to sketch out this reflection, in a way that is both conceptual and poetic. It is not very analytical. It is an invitation to think differently. I know fully well that no one is going to welcome the materials, but I am trying to develop a path around this idea.

A.B. — *The chiffonnier* is a Benjaminian figure, in any case.

Ph.S. — Yes. That's where I'm coming from.

A.B. — And in the audiovisual field, do you have any other projects?

Ph.S. — For now, just this film about concrete. And then... I'll see. I don't know yet. I'd like to try other things, maybe comics too. Comics are a medium that interests me a lot. First of all, because I'm a big fan of comics myself, and also because in recent years I've found that it's where people have managed to say things they couldn't have said elsewhere. Things that are sometimes very radical, tackling subjects in a very raw, very direct way, and which reach a huge audience. This freedom fascinates me completely. If I were offered a comic book, I think I would say yes right away, even before I had found a subject.

C.N. — I was thinking of Agnès Varda, with *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*...

Ph.S. — Ah yes, you've seen right through me: Benjamin, Varda... that's it. Michel de Certeau... a small form of gleaning, all that. Yes, that's the world I'm talking about.

C.N. — And not just in relation to weeds, but also to images... I think, is there a character who collects objects and makes sculptures with them?

Ph.S. — Absolutely. That's what interests me: the gesture of picking up what others have thrown away. Even these gestures of gathering... There are some very beautiful texts from the end of Henry David Thoreau's life about gathering. He never talks about it directly—with Thoreau, it's always very indirect—but he evokes the political dimension of gathering: what is

at stake in the forms of reappropriation?

Francesco, you were talking about the body: Thoreau uses gathering practices to show how we think with our bodies. It is a place where we relearn how to be attentive and present to our surroundings.

C.N. — And that reminds me of the contemporary classic: *The Mushroom at the End of the World...*²⁰

Ph.S. — Absolutely! Anna Tsing talks about the arts of attention. And Thoreau, in fact, already had this idea: the blueberry field as a space for the political reappropriation of one's own body, ways of being attentive and reconnected to one's environment. So, I'm taking up this idea to develop another kind of attention to the world of materials that surround us. Going out to find them here and there... It's a kind of transposition, but it's this type of idea that inspires me at the moment.

20 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2015).

Philippe Simay is a senior lecturer in philosophy at the Paris-Belleville School of Architecture. He hosted the documentary series *Habiter le monde* on Arte. His most recent publications include *La Ferme du rail: pour une ville écologique et solidaire* (with Clara Simay, Actes Sud, 2021) and *Bâtir avec ce qui reste* (Terre Urbaine, 2024)

Andrea Borsari is full professor of Aesthetics at the Department of Architecture of the University of Bologna and Faculty member at its Doctoral School, directs the book series "La vita e le forme" (Bup) and is deputy director of "Iride. Rivista di filosofia e discussione pubblica" (Il Mulino). He was recently visiting professor at UCLA, ENSA-Paris La Villette, the 4 Cities Unica Euromaster in Urban Studies - University of Copenhagen and the University of Sichuan, and visiting fellow at University of Amsterdam, University of Buenos Aires and Brown University – Providence. Among his publications: *Mondo, cose, immagini. Sulle forme dell'esperienza estetica* (Bup, 2018); *Mimicry. Estetica del divenire animale* (Mimesis, 2018); as editor, *Philosophical Anthropology and Critical Theory* (Iride, 02/2022) and *Temporary. Citizenship, Architecture and City* (Springer, 2023, with P. Ascari and A. Trentin).

Francesco Di Maio is a member of the Architectural Humanities research group and works with the Department of Architecture at the University of Bologna. He has edited the Italian editions of *Dark Deleuze* by Andrew Culp (Mimesis 2020) and *Qu'est-ce que l'écologie?* by Félix Guattari (Orthotes 2025). He has published *Univocità e individuazione: Gilles Deleuze lettore di Giovanni Duns Scoto* (Ventura 2023) and *Saturazione ed eccedenza. Il problema dello spazio nell'estetica e nella Naturphilosophie di Schelling* (Orthotes 2026).

Claudia Nigrelli is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), where she works on the Aerial Spatial Revolution research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. She holds a PhD jointly awarded by the University of Bologna and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. A member of the Architectural Humanities research group, she co-edited, together with J.-C. Anderson, T. Ebke and M. Pagan, the volume *Helmuth Plessner et la pensée française* (Hermann, 2025), and she recently published *La forma aperta in Helmuth Plessner: per un'architettura eccentrica* (BUP, 2026).

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