

CPCL

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF
CREATIVE PRACTICES
IN CITIES AND LANDSCAPES

Foto di Manuel Linger su Unsplash

Stratified Presents and Contested Spaces

Historical City and Urban Aesthetics 1

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

PEER REVIEWED

<https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.2612-0496/25963>

ISSN 2612-0496

Copyright © 2024 Francesco Di Maio, Claudia Nigrelli



I. The Aesthetic Dimension of the Historical City

The “historical city” has long been a centerpiece of Western urban discourse, yet its definition remains a site of profound intellectual and political struggle. As we present this first volume of the *European Journal of Creative Practices in Cities and Landscapes (CPCL)*, included in the *aesthetics series*, dedicated to the relationship between *Historical City and Urban Aesthetics*, we confront a global landscape where urban agglomerations are increasingly strained by the forces of neoliberal financialization, climate instability, and the erosion of the public sphere. This issue, titled *Stratified Presents and Contested Spaces*, seeks to move beyond the traditional view of the “historic center” as a fossilized relic or a mere object of conservation. Instead, we propose to understand the city through its historical, temporal, and aesthetic dimensions as a living, stratified, and nonlinear phenomenon.

Drawing on the theoretical foundations laid by Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer, this collection investigates the metropolitan experience—the *Großstadt*—as a privileged object of aesthetic inquiry. In these frameworks, aesthetics is not understood as a superficial concern for beauty, but as a critical lens through which we examine the “publicity” (*Öffentlichkeit*) of the city—where the material dimensions of space intersect with its symbolic meanings and socio-political practices. This introduction outlines the contributions to the first of two volumes, tracing a journey from deep philosophical genealogies to the urgent contestations of the contemporary street.

II. Ground Conceptual Frameworks in Urban Aesthetics

This first volume opens with a section dedicated to the conceptual frameworks that allow us to perceive the city anew. **Nuno Fonseca** provides a rigorous clarification in *The aesthetic (urban) experience of the historic(al) city: ontological and conceptual clarifications*. Fonseca addresses the fundamental question: what role does the historical city play in the contemporary aesthetic experience? By engaging with thinkers like Alois Riegl, Camillo Sitte, and Françoise Choay, he disentangles the layers of meaning embedded in notions of “monument” and “heritage.” Fonseca advocates for a renewed, situated, and multisensory notion of aesthetic experience, employing categories such as “ruins” to mark endurance, “rhythms” to assess urban flows, and “atmospheres” to capture the affective tonality of the historical environment.

The genealogical investigation continues with **Olivier Agard’s** study, *City and Community in Siegfried Kracauer’s Weimar essays*. Agard situates Kracauer’s engagement with *Gemeinschaft* within the tumultuous 1920s, arguing against authoritarian interpretations. He shows how Kracauer

reworked Simmel's figure of the stranger through a lens of existential alienation and "metaphysical waiting." As the 1920s progressed, this focus secularized into a critique of mass culture and the emergence of an urban *Publikum*. Agard's contribution is vital for understanding how the tension between community and mass society remains a central aesthetic problem for the modern democratic city.

III. Mnemonic Landscapes and the Specters of History

The middle section of the volume explores how the historical city is inhabited by more than just its current residents. In *Contraband: On the Shades of John Berger*, **Graeme Gilloch** unfolds Berger's fascination with the aesthetics of place and the "benign specters" that haunt them. Using leitmotifs like terroir and the "rendezvous," Gilloch argues that to live is to jostle amidst a "city of shades." For Berger, and by extension for this volume, any place without ghosts is bereft of memory—it is "uninhabitable, unendurable, inhuman." This illicit crossing of the border between life and death—what Gilloch terms "contraband"—is presented as a necessary condition for a truly human urbanity.

An analysis addressing psycho-social issues inherent in urban stratification is further developed in the article by **Francesco Di Maio** entitled *On οἶκος: The role of aesthetics in Félix Guattari's urban ecosophy*. This contribution sets a high theoretical bar by examining Guattari's transversalist framework. Di Maio argues that ecosophy articulates the interdependence of environmental, social, and subjective ecologies, extending ecology beyond biological life to encompass technological and semiotic processes. By situating subjectivity within "transindividual assemblages," Di Maio clarifies how the city acts as a megamachine that produces both flows and segmentations. Crucially, he foregrounds a "new aesthetic paradigm" that is not about the aestheticization of the social, but an orientation toward sensibility and creativity capable of resisting capitalist homogenization.

The intrinsic link between processes of aestheticisation and public spaces is explored in depth in the following two essays. When the memory "shades" are formalized into state-sanctioned monuments, they often become sites of intense friction. **Aneta Kohoutova** addresses this in *How do we build the future on the past? Public Spaces as solid forms filled with new content*. Kohoutova analyzes why monuments become sites of "mnemonic regime change," arguing that statues are not neutral records but allegories of a social order that can embody exclusion. Through the lens of "monumental history," she evaluates the transformative potential of toppling monuments as an act of collective healing. By contrasting static statues with digital, inclusive art projects, she advocates for "unfreezing" the capacity of marginalized groups to speak within the built environment.

This critique of the static is furthered by **Joëlle Zask** in *From the Public Square to the Democratic Square*. Zask offers a scathing critique of the dominant “mineral” and geometric model of the public square’s conception, which she identifies as a device of imperial and colonial control. She reconstructs an alternative genealogy of the democratic square—rooted in the ancient agora—where public space is an ecologically embedded, socially plural, and action-oriented landscape. Zask argues that the integration of nature is not an aesthetic add-on but a fundamental condition for the survival of democracy.

IV. Bodies in Conflict: Between Resistance and Disneylandization

The volume then turns to the “embodied” reality of the contemporary city. **Federica Castelli**, in *Embodied epistemologies and ethics of care: Rethinking the city as a passionate public space*, investigates the nexus between politics, bodies, and urban space from intersectional, transfeminist, and queer perspectives. Castelli challenges the foundational private/public dichotomy, revealing cities as contested, teeming, and “passionate” spaces. By prioritizing the “embodied gaze” and the “ethics of care,” she re-reads urban dynamics as inherently political, showing how collective gestures can disrupt patriarchal claims to homogeneity and universality.

The necessity of such disruption is underscored by the structural crises documented by **Gregor Fitzi** in *The Disneylandization of the Historic City of Florence*. Fitzi provides a sobering analysis of Florence’s transition from “enrichment capitalism” to an aggressive “entertainment-industry” model. Drawing on sociological aesthetics, he documents how overtourism has eroded the “authentic life-world,” replaced by “invented traditions” and “selfie-worthy” culinary displays. Fitzi’s research details the real-estate bubble driven by short-term rental platforms—the “diffused hotel” model—which displaces residents and transforms the city into an “open-air factory for financial rent.” This “Disneylandization” threatens the very viability of the historical city as a site of lived heritage.

V. Synthesis: Practices and Positions

The final section of Volume 1 bridges theory and praxis. In the Practices section, **Lidia Errante**’s contribution, *Environmental challenges and responsive public spaces*, confronts the climate crisis. Errante examines how extreme weather events—heatwaves and “water bombs”—are transforming the set of shared behaviors we call “urbanity.” She highlights Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) as effective tools for enhancing urban resilience, arguing that when NBS are integrated into planning, they do more than mitigate climate change; they improve environmental comfort and foster a more inclusive and livable urban ecosystem.

The volume concludes with a *Positions paper*: a filmed interview with philosopher **Philippe Simay**, conducted by **Andrea Borsari, Francesco Di Maio, and Claudia Nigrelli**, titled *Housing, dwelling, city, world: Towards an embedded philosophy*. Taking the documentary series *Habiter le monde* as a point of departure, Simay develops an “embedded philosophy” grounded in situated encounters with diverse architectural forms and cultures. The conversation challenges universalizing conceptions of the city, focusing instead on vernacular architecture, material reuse, and the “stratified and contested dimension of lived urban experience.”

The contributions to this first volume collectively argue that the aesthetics of the historical city cannot be separated from the political and ethical conditions of its inhabitants. From the ecosophic “megamachine” of Guattari to the “Disneylandized” streets of Florence, and from the “contraband” ghosts of Berger to the “passionate” bodies of transfeminist resistance, these essays map a territory of profound urban changes. They suggest that the future of the historical city lies not in its preservation as a static monument, but in our ability to “unfreeze” its senses, integrate its ecological realities, and reclaim public spaces as sites of democratic negotiation, action, and recognition.

We invite the reader to engage with these frameworks as we prepare for the second volume of this issue, which will further explore the practical and policy-oriented implications of these aesthetic transformations.

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'écophilosophie?* 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).