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**STRATIFIED PRESENTS
AND CONTESTED SPACES
HISTORICAL CITY
AND URBAN AESTHETICS 1**

Edited by
Francesco Di Maio and Claudia Nigrelli

Olivier Agard, Andrea Borsari,
Federica Castelli, Francesco Di Maio,
Lidia Errante, Gregor Fitz, Nuno Fonseca,
Graeme Gilloch, Aneta Jasná,
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STRATIFIED PRESENTS AND CONTESTED SPACES HISTORICAL CITY AND URBAN AESTHETICS ¹

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¹ This double volume brings together, among other things, a reworking of some of the contributions to the conference Historical City and Urban Aesthetics: Conceptual Framework and Public Spaces, organised by Andrea Borsari, Francesco Di Maio and Claudia Nigrelli of the Architectural Humanities group of the Department of Architecture at the University of Bologna. The conference was held in the Sala Manfredi of Palazzo Poggi in Bologna on 12 and 13 December 2024, concluding on the morning of 14 December 2024 with a round table discussion in the Sala Tassinari of Palazzo d'Accursio in Bologna. This last part brought together some of the results obtained in the previous days and relaunched them, applying them specifically to the case of Bologna. The organisation of that conference and the editing of these two volumes of CPCL were developed within the project funded by the European Union - NextGenerationEU under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) - Mission 4 Education and Research - Component 2 From Research to Business - Investment Investment 1.3, Notice D.D. 341 of 15/03/2022, entitled: Cultural Heritage Active Innovation for Sustainable Society (CHANGES), proposal code PE0000020 - CUP J33C22002850006. For further information, see the link: <https://site.unibo.it/architecturalhumanities/it/agenda/historical-city-and-urban-aesthetics-conceptual-framework-and-public-spaces>.



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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

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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).

MAIN SECTION

The aesthetic (urban) experience of the historic(al) city: Ontological and conceptual clarifications

Nuno Fonseca — NOVA Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA)
Contact: nmfonseca@fcsh.unl.pt

ABSTRACT

When asking what role, the historical city plays in the aesthetic experience of the contemporary city, it is important to clarify what do we mean by "historic(al) city" and what categories of urban aesthetic experience may be relevant in this context. From the hypothesis that the ontological structure of a city is itself historical in character, we need to disentangle what is historic about some cities or parts of cities. With the help of authors such as Riegler, Sitte, Giovannoni and Choay, we need to understand how notions like history, monument, museum and heritage reveal layers of meaning of the historic. Then, with categories such as "ruins" (an explicit category of the historicity, ephemerality and endurance of built environments), "rhythms" (an analytical tool for assessing the dynamics of urban flows), "atmospheres" (a phenomenological concept that allows for an understanding of the affective tonality of spaces or situations) and "cityscape" (in all its multisensory, multilayered and symbolic comprehensiveness) we briefly try to shed light on the aesthetic role of the historic(al) city in the general urban experience, keeping in mind a renewed notion of aesthetic experience that is situated, multisensorial and engaged with the city.

KEYWORDS

Historicity; Monument; Heritage; Aesthetic Experience; Ruins.

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When considering the role of the historical city in the aesthetic experience of the contemporary city, it is important to clarify what is meant by 'historic(al) city' and which categories of urban aesthetic experience may be relevant in this context. Assuming that the ontological structure of a city is historical in character, we will first unravel the conceptual layers of urban historicity, through notions like history, monument, museum or heritage. In the second part of this paper, we will show how aesthetic categories chosen for their connection to the temporal and processual nature of cities such as *ruins*, *rhythms*, *atmospheres* and *cityscapes* can illuminate the aesthetic role of the historic dimension in urban experiences, but within the framework of a renewed notion of aesthetic experience, one that is situated, multisensorial and engaged with the city.

I. "What is a city?"

To understand the contemporary aesthetic experience of a historic(al) city, we need first to clarify what we mean by the term "historic(al) city". And although it seems to be a rather simple and intuitive concept, there are many layers of meaning to unravel. Before dealing with the adjective historic or historical¹ we must ask "What is a city?". A few years ago, when asked about the kind of ontological category that best fits the city, the Italian philosopher Achille Varzi said that it is a *process*². Varzi was simply interested in using a basic contemporary metaphysical category that would allow cities to resist the challenge of identity through time: how can we use the same name (Rome, Paris, etc) for different sets of buildings, streets, blocks and neighborhoods through the ages? Sets that were successively destroyed and replaced by other sets of buildings, streets and blocks, several times and in different configurations throughout its history, and think that it is the same city even if constitutionally different each time? So, what becomes evident from this processual nature of cities – and this is the reason why I evoke Varzi's answer – is that they are temporal processes and thus have an historical character: they are series or sequences of different events related to each other in different causal relations at different moments in time (and space) that involve a constant and convoluted transformation of states of affairs and forms. The plural seems, actually, more accurate, since a city is not only a process but a set of processes, given the complex and convoluted variability of processes of urbanization that constitute cities. And because these processes occur at different times and with different speeds/rhythms, we could even adopt Reinhart Koselleck's pluralistic perspective on history and its cor-

1 I'm distinguishing the "historical", when it is related to a general and more abstract determination, as in something that is related or pertains to History, from "historic", when this is a concrete determination, as when it is perceived or valued as some important event, situation or object of a specific past.

2 Achille Varzi, "What is a city?", *Topoi* 40, n° 2 (2021): 399–408, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-019-09647-4>

responding stratigraphical metaphor of different layers or “sediments of time” (*Zeitschichten*) constituting the city.³

Cities as historical

Saying that all cities are historical means that they endure through time, that they are subject to change, that they have variations on their structure, their constitution and their form, that they are sequences of events, that have causes and consequences, preparing, originating or preventing other events, which now considering how they can be perceived, understood or represented also means that they might be read (or told) as going in a certain direction, sometimes interrupted, sometimes deviated or merely transformed, carrying a certain purpose but that they can also be remembered or envisaged in a different way at a different time.

“History” has this congenital ambiguity of meaning both a series of events occurring in time (and space) and a way to report, to remember and to narrate this spatio-temporal occurrence or sequence of events. In an essay on history for the encyclopedia Einaudi, the French historian Jacques Le Goff recalled the etymology of the word to highlight the testimonial and narrative aspect of history but also stressing this ambiguity between the object of the narration and the narration itself.⁴ We can easily infer that it is this narration that gives meaning and order to the sequence, if not the actual sequentiality of those events. Hence “historical” means that it belongs to the character of the city to be part of a narration. Its historicity is not only linked to the fact of its existence in space and time but also (and probably more importantly) to its ability to feature a narrative account of its existence. And, to clarify my previous distinction against historical –, historic means that it is already the result of a particular account, of a judgment on its significance and value for a particular history, be it personal, municipal, national or even universal.

History, memory and monument

Yet, to fully understand the multilayered meanings associated with the historic city in the context of contemporary urban aesthetics, we also must consider other notions that enrich and complexify the category we are dealing with. One of them results from the close connection between history and memory. History is a way to report what has been seen, giving testimony and thus preserving what is known from what took place. It is a way to remember and pass on to the next generations the knowledge about what occurred. In fact, a complex dynamic between the past, the present and, in a certain sense, also the future is constantly undergoing

3 Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, transl. and ed. S. Franzel and S.-L. Hoffmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 3-9.

4 Jacques Le Goff, *Storia e memoria* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), 5.

in the making of history. As an interpretative narration, history is always being made in the present, even if using the traces and remnants of the past. There is constantly a reordering of the past that is being made from the point of view of the present, using the criteria and values of the present and often rhetorically oriented to a virtual future or, to say it in other words, with a certain goal. So, the documents and monuments that can be seen as the signs of the past are, in this sense, historical tools or artefacts of collective or objectified memory.⁵

Monuments are often produced intentionally to convey a certain interpretation of what occurred serving the purpose of remembrance or commemoration of a meaningful or even a symbolic past. This is evident from the etymology of the word “monument”, from the Latin verb “*monere*”, meaning “to warn”, “to recall”, to bring to memory or to mind.⁶ What matters here is, of course, the *historic city* and not necessarily the *historic monument* but in a sense the historic city is a derivation from this idea of the historic monument, as the late Françoise Choay has properly demonstrated in her persuasive book, translated into English as *The Invention of the Historic Monument*⁷. There she begins by underlining a sometimes-overlooked distinction between the *monument* and the *historic monument*, alluding and expanding from the one made originally by the Austrian art historian Aloïs Riegl in his short but influential essay from 1903 on the *Modern Cult of Monuments*.⁸

According to Riegl, there is already a difference between a *monument* as an intentionally produced artefact – which is the original meaning of the term, “a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations”⁹ – and an *unintentional monument* – which is a monument that can only produce this effect of remembrance, of bringing the past to mind. Which it does *subjectively*, that is to say, in the eyes of the beholder, and *a posteriori*, because it is seen retrospectively by a modern observer as having an historical value.¹⁰ For Riegl this means that the artefact is a trace, a sign, of something that once occurred or came to be and is no more, which makes it thus *historical*¹¹. Of course, any object or remnant from a bygone age can be invested with a memorial function by

5 See Pierre Nora, “Mémoire collective” in *La Nouvelle Histoire*, edited by J. Le Goff, R. Chartier and J. Revel (Paris: CEPL, 1978), 398-401.

6 Le Goff, *Storia e memoria*, 443. See also Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, transl. Lauren M. O’Connell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6.

7 It was published originally in French as *L’allégorie du patrimoine*, in 1992, at Éditions du Seuil.

8 “Der moderne Denkmalkultus: sein Wesen und seine Entstehung” was published in Vienna by W. Braumüller and translated into English as “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin”, trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 21–51.

9 Riegl, “The Modern Cult”, 21.

10 Ibid., 23.

11 “Everything that has been and is no longer we call *historical*, in accordance with the modern notion that what has been can never be again, and that everything that has been constitutes an irreplaceable and irremovable link in a chain of development.” (Ibid., 21).

the modern observer, but it is often the sensible effects of the ravages of time on the appearance of the object – its state of degradation, of ruination, its *patina* – that arouses in the modern individual this diffuse impression (this *Stimmungswirkung*) of the voracity of Chronos and the representation of the inexorable cycle of generation and corruption, life and death, “of the emergence of the particular from the general and its gradual but inevitable dissolution back into the general”.¹²

Since Alois Riegl, an art historian but also a philosopher and a jurist, was writing this essay as the president of the Austrian Commission on Historic Monuments, he was both interested in the aesthetic and the scientific/historical issues and the more practical and even socio-political aspects of restoration and preservation policies.¹³ So, deciding what an historic monument - is and by extension an historic city -, summons not only theoretical considerations but also cultural, political and even economical ones.

Historic values: historicization, aestheticization and eventual museumification

Moreover, we must know that, for Riegl, this modern cult of monuments is structured by a dialectical opposition between memorial or commemorative values (*Erinnerungswerte*) and contemporary or present-day ones (*Gegenwartswerte*). It is within those commemorative values, the ones linked to the past and that invoke memory, that he includes the, aforementioned, *historical value* along with what he calls the “age-value” or *value of antiquity* (*Alterswert*).¹⁴ This last one results from the perceivable marks of time and this “vaguely aesthetic” sentiment of its incommensurable age (or antiquity) and of our own transience and ephemerality. The historical value purports to a more cognitive type of value, as it relates us to and informs us about something that occurred in a past era which, otherwise, we could not have access to. And Riegl was, of course, very aware of the different attitudes and sensibilities toward historic monuments. On the one hand, he considered the Romantic cult of ruins and antiquity that inspired authors such as John Ruskin to praise the value of monuments that should be preserved in their authentic state, even if they were dilapidated. On the other hand, he considered the interest in restoring old monuments, sometimes replacing lost parts with new ones or rebuilding them in the presumed style to make them more accessible to present and future generations.¹⁵ In fact, these historian and preservationist attitudes already had a long history at the time, since the modern fascination with

12 Ibid., 24. See also Michael Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2006), 153.

13 See Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 111 and Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface*, 141-4.

14 Riegl, “The Modern Cult”, 23-24.

15 The most renowned representative of this attitude would, of course, be the French architect Viollet-le-Duc. See Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 92-106.

ancient monuments could be traced at least to the Renaissance, although Françoise Choay wonders at the possibility of tracing it back further to Medieval times or even Antiquity, when people already revealed a certain interest in respecting and collecting antiques.¹⁶ But Choay rightly points out that there is a need for the *distanciation* of history, for an interruption or discontinuity in the process of cultural tradition between the Ancients (of Antiquity) and the Moderns (of the Quattrocento), in order to properly speak of the birth of the *historic monument*.¹⁷ Interestingly enough, when we consider the evolution of the concept of historic heritage in recent years, we can see that the distance between the past and the present has been shortening, particularly in regard to the historicization of certain districts in contemporary cities for the purpose of urban regeneration induced by tourism.

This invention of the historic monument in the Quattrocento, the Modern cult of monuments, was also combined with the birth or, at least, the beginning of the process that would take us to our Modern conception of art. So, it is not a surprise that there was and still is an aestheticization of our perception of historic monuments (and, by extension, the historic city). The thirst for knowledge of the humanist scholar (the "historian") was paired with the delighted contemplation of the Renaissance artist and the avid *amateur* of these fascinating antiques, which quickly became prey to the concupiscent collecting impulse of princes, aediles and other *signori*.¹⁸ These private collections could be now seen as anticipating the idea of the museum, which would develop in the following centuries and would become public and institutionalized after the French revolution. Of course, a similar attention to ancient buildings and public monuments started to emerge before, and already with some social, political and economic impact, but only after the French revolution did a more scientific and systematic policy concerning the preservation, conservation or restoration of historic heritage become properly institutionalized.¹⁹ Historic monuments became also symbols for whole nations, for a whole collective memory, and thus turned into public property, at first national but, with time, earning the right to become also humanity's universal heritage. It was the democratizing and emancipating ideals of the Enlightenment that prepared this new layer of meaning concerning the historic monument and a new conservation attitude towards it, but also this consequence of the museumification of heritage.²⁰

16 Ibid., 17-27.

17 Ibid., 20.

18 Ibid., 27-39.

19 Ibid., 83-89.

20 Ibid., 66-69.

Historic values: from monuments to cities

So, the *historic* (in this context) is associated with a variety of values and layers of meaning that qualify it accordingly. It is related to the rememorating or commemorative value of the monument, its cognitive, artistic and symbolic value (collective, national or even universal) that became to deserve an almost pious preservation, if not a restorative and revivifying treatment, which eventually crystalizes into a museum-like piece of property and thus a worthy public asset, a valuable item of heritage. But even if these developments and specifications of the adjective historic (and historical) seem to apply only to isolated items, monuments or buildings, they were progressively transferred to situated and local ensembles or parts of (if not whole) cities.²¹ However, worrying about an historic city or an historic urban district would only begin to make sense at a time when planning a city or doing a big urban intervention was also a concern. Moreover, considering its historic status also needed a certain distance or a sort of interruption between urbanization processes, between urban rhythms or urban forms, probably also different styles of *urbanizing*. What I mean is that the difference between a modern city and an older or ancient city – how it is structured, how it is shaped – would have to be noticeable in order to consider the latter *historic*. In fact, only after the Industrial Revolution and its indelible impact on the processes of urbanization did this difference become apparent and a concern. The development of cities or the appearance of new ones embodying the values of rationality and productivity, implementing the geometric optimization of space for the purpose of efficient arrangements and fast circulation, deployed new morphological patterns in the built environment that were radically different from the organic forms and the slow-paced yet harmonious rhythms of pre-industrial towns.

Many authors, poets and artists noticed this transformation, and some deplored these new ugly and inhumane settlements with disgust and a fair amount of nostalgia for the old traditional townscapes that, by contrast, were becoming memorials of merrier times. Architects like Augustus Pugin, pioneer of the Gothic revival movement in England, and aesthetes like John Ruskin, who praised the integrated harmony of historic cities like Venice, Florence or Oxford, or even Victor Hugo, in what concerns the “Vieux Paris”, were sounding the alarm for the disappearance of the old towns fabric and advocating a return to the past or, at least, calling for the preservation of their remains.²² But it was the Viennese architect and painter Camillo Sitte who gave a more reflective and critical account of

21 Ibid., 117 sq.

22 See Françoise Choay, *L'urbanisme: utopies et réalités une anthologie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 10-24 and Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 118-122.

the aesthetic quality of the *historic city* in his influential *Städtebau*.²³

Not only that, but he was the one understanding the historicity of the pre-industrial city, using what some have called an “operational” notion of the historic city.²⁴

Even if he assumes the evolution of cities as historical continua, when studying the morphology and typology of urban forms diachronically he reveals important differences between Modern (industrial) urbanization and the character of pre-industrial cities, which already belong to the past: *they are historic cities*. Contrary to a wrong and widespread interpretation – disseminated mainly by modernists such as Le Corbusier – Sitte did not promote a reactionary return to the past. He understood that times had changed, that he and his contemporaries were living different times and distinct rhythms, governed by very different values and prospects, but he was nonetheless a critic of the Modern urban city-building because of its strict focus on technical, predictable and functional patterns which made it aesthetically meagre, unimaginative and uninspiring.²⁵ Through the thorough analysis of the urban forms of ancient cities (which most likely makes him the godfather of urban morphology), he then fostered the historic city as an aesthetic model for future planning, even if he was aware of the limitations of a systematic implementation of that model. If city-building is to be artistic, it must be conceived with touch and intuition. The rules of city-building cannot be reduced to universal principles, and what works in one town does not necessarily apply to another.²⁶

One of the dangers of historicizing cities or parts of cities is, as we have mentioned in relation to the historic monument, the temptation of wanting to preserve the city or urban ensemble as an untouchable work of art, removed from daily life, that should be only contemplated and not actually experienced. This is the danger of *museumification*. Treating a city or a part of a city as a museum-piece is the same as killing that city or urban area. To quote Françoise Choay, “In becoming historical, it loses its historicity”²⁷. To prevent this nefarious consequence of historicizing cities, it is important to understand that a city is not just a physical built environment, but a dynamic environment where the “social action” – to quote

23 Originally published in Vienna in 1889 by Carl Graeser as *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, it was later translated into English for a collection of Columbia University Studies in Art History and Archaeology as Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, trans. George R. Collins and Christiane C. Collins (New York: Random House, 1965).

24 Francesco Bandarin and Ron van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing heritage in an urban century* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 10. In a preface to the French translation of Sitte's *Städtebau*, Françoise Choay acknowledges him as being the inventor of the term “historic city”. See Françoise Choay, foreword to *L'Art de bâtir les villes – L'urbanisme selon ses fondements artistiques*, by Camillo Sitte (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), iv.

25 See Sitte, *City Planning*, 83-90.

26 Ibid., 84-85.

27 Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 129.

Mumford²⁸ – occurs. As a dynamic environment it is a complex system of differently integrated structures, performing a variety of functions and constantly changing. And to recall what has been said at the beginning of this paper, the city is a process or a set of processes, consequently, different times and distinct rhythms may have to coexist, interact and mingle in the same urban system.

Urban heritage (*patrimonio urbano*) and environment (*ambiente*)

One of the inheritors of Camillo Sitte's morphological approach was Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947), architect, art historian and engineer. In his underread book *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova* (1931)²⁹, – which could probably be translated as *Ancient cities and new buildings or new urbanism*³⁰ – Giovannoni grants the historic urban ensembles – or urban heritage (*patrimonio urbano*) – not so much a museum value as a contemporary use value (which was, as mentioned, one of the present-day values (*Gegenwartswerte*) acknowledged by Alois Riegl to historic monuments), properly integrating them in the context of the whole city (or the region) and of modern society. According to Giovannoni, the historic city could still play a relevant role, not necessarily linked to the productive and communication functions of the urban system, but rather to the social and cultural dimensions of local city life.³¹

This is not the place for the particulars of Giovannoni's proposal, but I just want to underline that his principles in urban planning were very much aesthetically and artistically-oriented – as in Sitte's view – and they implied a contextual treatment of the urban heritage. In this regard and to emphasize the fact that a historic city is not just a collection of historic buildings but a whole environment where the buildings, streets and the activities there occurring are interconnected, he used the notion of *ambiente*, which could be translated here as context or urban fabric.³²

These notions of urban heritage (*patrimonio urbano*) and later urban landscape would become important in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly, after the 60's, in the international context of practices

28 Lewis Mumford famously characterized the city as both a physical environment (a set of built structures) and the dynamic social web of interactions, the theatre of "social action". See Lewis Mumford, "What is a city?" in *The City Reader*, ed. R. LeGates and F. Stout (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 93.

29 Given the absence of an English translation and the unavailability of the Italian version, I'll refer to the French translation: Gustavo Giovannoni, *L'Urbanisme face aux villes anciennes*, trans. Jean-Marc Mandosio, Amélie Petita and Claire Tandille (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).

30 Having in mind the expression "edilizia cittadina" as the French translators explain in the glossary included in the French edition: Giovannoni, *L'Urbanisme face aux villes anciennes*, 334.

31 Ibid., 210-219, and Barbarin and van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape*, 14.

32 He explicitly assumes the "contextualist" approach when discussing the problem of historic neighbourhoods. See Giovannoni, *L'Urbanisme face aux villes anciennes*, 211, 216 and 333, for an explanatory glossary included by the French translators.

of preservation with UNESCO's recommendations of 1962 and the Venice Charter of 1964,³³ but also with the theoretical influence of the morphological analysis of townscapes throughout history by the urban geographer M. R. G. Conzen, who showed how the fabric of a city is the outcome of a historical process of successive layering³⁴ and of the typo-morphological approach by the Italian architects, such as Saverio Muratori and Leonardo Benevolo.

Of course, the notion of heritage (*patrimonio*) carries with it an unavoidable economical dimension and the consequences of patrimonialisation of historic cities or historic districts would have strong impacts on their political economy and consequences on society and cultural industries.³⁵ This is obviously an issue that affects tremendously the aesthetic experience of contemporary cities.

II. Urban aesthetic experience as an “engaged” environmental experience

We will now consider the city from an aesthetic perspective, exploring the kinds of aesthetic experiences that can be had in the context of a historic city. However, to do so properly, we must understand that the city is not merely an object to be contemplated, and that aesthetic experience should not be confined to the traditional framework which pits a contemplating subject against a separate object that would be the sole focus of aesthetic appreciation. Urban aesthetic experience should instead be understood as a situated, immersive, multisensorial and *engaged* kind of experience that occurs in a continual interaction – or “aesthetic transaction” – with a dynamic environment where, to evoke the American philosopher Arnold Berleant, an “aesthetic field” emerges.³⁶ It is in this environmental and “engagement” perspective that aesthetic experience in the city does make sense, all the more because a city is not an object that could be contemplated from a glance, but a dynamic and convoluted environment that must be endured in space and time, in multiple directions, in many different sensory modalities and hopefully also within the framework of the historical and cultural background that will contextualize the experience and symbolically inspire the imagination. And since we have previously identified the city with a set of spatio-temporal processes, there are some aesthetic categories that relate adequately to these processual and temporal dimensions of urban environments and thus may help us

33 Barbarin and van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape*, 37-41.

34 Ibid., 27.

35 Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 138-163 and, for a general discussion of the theme, the classic but still relevant G. J. Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge, *The Tourist-Historic City* (London and New York: Belhaven Press, 1990).

36 Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Cybereditions, 2000), 82-84.

to shed light on the qualities of this kind of urban aesthetic experience.³⁷

Ruins

The category of *ruins* – to mention one that immediately refers to the historical nature of cities – has been evoked quite frequently in contemporary aesthetics, but it has also fascinated poets, writers, and artists since at least the Renaissance, as shown by Choay. Ruins are the result of temporal processes partly natural, such as erosion and material degradation caused by geological, meteorological, and biochemical processes; and partly human, such as the cessation of human activity, abandonment, and loss of functionality. This is probably why ruins are symbols of the passage of time and the fragility and ephemerality of human existence. Because of this, they represent an inevitable fate for cities or parts of cities. They are monuments of an urban past and perceptual evidence of the historicity of urban environments. On the one hand, ruins are perceivable traces of the constant transaction between the built environment and the forces of nature. On the other hand, as unintentional historical monuments, ruins allow meaning to be produced in a place. This is because they are fragments in the puzzle of history and enigmatic expressions of a place's singular character, its *genius loci*.³⁸

As Alois Riegl pointed out, the age-value of ruins manifests itself through sensorial perception and is thus an important feature of urban aesthetic experience in cities with a long history. Of course, it's not only ruins from classical antiquity or the medieval ages that we can come across in contemporary cities. Industrial and commercial ruins have also become common, such as old factories, warehouses, abandoned parking buildings, closed malls, bankrupt stores, and decadent infrastructure like stadiums, unfinished bridges, and roads. Most of these are not considered heritage sites – yet. However, the history and spirit of a place can be perceived through these modern ruins, which, through their character and the quality of the debris (or rubble), can tell us a lot about the culture and era.³⁹

37 In a recent article, I explored some aesthetics categories that would be suitable to better understand urban experience, precisely related to the spatio-temporal dimension of cities. Here I am using some that are more relevant to their temporal and historical aspect. See Nuno Fonseca, "On Some Aesthetic Categories of Urban Experience: Surveying Conceptual Tools for an Aesthetics of the City", *Iride* 37, n°s 102-103 (2024), 347-359. <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1414/116267>

38 Ibid., 351-52.

39 The French philosopher Bruce Bégout considers that a significant number of contemporary buildings are products of a consumer society where goods are made to be consumed or destroyed, not to last. This logic of programmed obsolescence is embedded in their essence, so they will not endure the natural process of decaying into ruins. Instead, their destruction produces mere rubble. While ruins have historical and aesthetic value, rubble is simply worthless, amorphous, and meaningless. See Bruce Bégout, *Obsolescence des ruines. Essai philosophique sur les gravats* (Paris: Éditions Inculte, 2022), 113-147.

Rhythms

The different types of ruins, that manifest themselves through a different character but nonetheless are eventually scattered through a variety of areas in the same city are also perceptible traces of different epochs, different processes at different paces that occurred throughout its history, as if they were “sediments of time”, to reuse Koselleck’s expression, and thus present a geological or stratigraphical image of the distinct layers of historical meaning in the city. From the robust – even if eroded by time – stone of ancient temples and monuments to the gravel or junk quality of contemporary derelict buildings and infrastructure, they give us the impression of different *rhythms* of history too – rhythms that are perceptible through sensorial experience and can thus be referred to as another aesthetically relevant category. However, this impression often contrasts with the contemporary rhythms surrounding those same buildings or monuments. A musical metaphor applied to temporality and recently discussed by Andrea Borsari, “dissonance”⁴⁰, could be useful to understand the contemporary experience of historic cities (or districts) in the context of urban neoliberalism and touristification, as there seems to be a mismatch between the different temporalities and how they are perceived, a dilation between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” – to reuse Koselleck’s vocabulary evoked by Borsari in the same article – and a compression of the perception and representation of history in a thin-layered present.⁴¹

From an architectural and morphological perspective, the different rhythms can also be perceived and furthered by the strong, noticeable differences between modern planning and ancient city structures, as pointed out by Sitte and Giovannoni: large-scale avenues, geometric alignments, regular blocks, and open spaces in modern cities, against smaller streets, irregular paths, and more typological variation in buildings in historic districts. These differences affect not only the sensory experience, but also the rhythm of the actions and activities that occur in these distinct places.

Atmospheres

When talking about historic cities, historic buildings, ruins and rhythms and how these affect the urban aesthetic experience, we could probably also evoke a notion like *atmosphere*, which resonates other concepts like «*stimmung*», mood, «*aura*» or *ambiance* in a conceptual constellation that somehow refers to the affective tonality of places and/or situations. This

40 Andrea Borsari, “Dissonant Times,” in *Temporary: Citizenship, Architecture and City*, ed. A. Borsari, A. Trentin and P. Ascari (Springer, 2024), 109-119.

41 Borsari here evokes Enrico Traverso’s analysis of the social and cultural consequences of “presentism”, François Hartog’s coined regime of historicity. See Borsari, “Dissonant Times”, 114-15.

ontologically peculiar, hybrid, category⁴² is linked not only to the sensory, the material (even the meteorological), but also to the symbolic and cultural characteristics of a particular environment or urban context, a part of a city or the whole city. But it is precisely its ephemerality and transience, the fact that it emerges and endures, that it may change, evolve, and eventually disappear, that makes it appropriate to take the temperature of the historical dimension of streets, neighbourhoods, and cities.

Cityscape

And finally, as a summation of the preceding ones, the *cityscape*,⁴³ which is not only a visual perspective of the urban landscape, since the city is not just a complex set of visible surfaces, but a dynamic, multisensory and symbolic environment. Thus, the cityscape should also include the social “action” of the city, the character of its everyday life, its cultural idiosyncrasies, its historical narratives, symbols and icons. In a way, we could say that the cityscape includes, or stems from, the city's *atmospheres*, *rhythms* and *ruins*, so its historical character and its historicity is expressed and represented in this image or collection of images (not only in its visual but in the multimodal sense) of the city.

The aesthetic experience of the urban landscape is thus always affected by the multilayered historicity of a city, which is embroidered in its texture and even in its structure, and results, not only from the contingencies of the (spatio-)temporal processes of urbanization, but also from the socio-political, economic, cultural and symbolic strategies in the perception and representation of that history. As previously shown, the historic is associated with a variety of values and layers of meaning related to collective memory – which is often objectified in commemorative monuments, groups of buildings, or whole districts – and related to several historicization and aestheticization processes that can result in different attitudes and perceptions, ranging from impulses to restore and preserve to romantic contemplation and worship of ruins. Ultimately, this can turn historic districts into lifeless, museum-like scenery and frequently monetized as a touristic asset or transformed into symbolic urban heritage capital. But if, on the contrary, it can be wisely integrated into the urban structure and harmonized with the rhythms and dynamic life of the city, with its atmospheres and overall cityscape, it can certainly allow meaningful and valuable aesthetic experiences.

42 Tonino Griffero calls it a “quasi-thing”, not entirely subjective, neither entirely objective. See Tonino Griffero, *Quasi-Things. The Paradigm of Atmospheres*, trans. Sarah de Sanctis (New York: Suny Press, 2017).

43 Even though we could find glimpses of a notion of urban landscapes or images of the city already in authors such as Simmel, Sitte, Kracauer or Benjamin, and a more stabilized even if mostly focused on the perceptual and cognitive “imageability” of the city with Kevin Lynch, I am here expanding the notion of cityscape to include the social, cultural and symbolic landscape of the urban experience. See Nuno Fonseca, “On Some Aesthetic Categories of Urban Experience”, 356-7.

Nuno Fonseca (b. 1974) is an associate researcher at the NOVA Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA), where he has coordinated the “Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art” research group within Culturelab until 2025. His research focuses on aesthetics and philosophy of art, particularly aesthetic experience, values, sound art, urban space, and everyday life. He also continues his work on Port-Royal’s Logic, having authored its first Portuguese translation. He has taught several courses at NOVA University Lisbon and other Portuguese universities in aesthetics, rhetoric, logic, and urban aesthetics. He has co-edited multiple national and international volumes on art, philosophy, and the city.

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MAIN SECTION

City and Community in Siegfried Kracauer's Weimar essays

Olivier Agard — Sorbonne University, Paris, France
Contact: olivier.agard@sorbonne-universite.fr

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of Siegfried Kracauer's reflection on *Gemeinschaft* during the Weimar Republic, situating it within broader debates on community, modernity, and urban life in 1920s Germany. It argues that Kracauer's engagement with community cannot be reduced to authoritarian or *völkisch* interpretations, but unfolds through a complex analysis of loss, alienation, and collective experience in the modern metropolis. In his early writings, Kracauer depicts the big city as a space of existential alienation and spiritual homelessness, drawing critically on Georg Simmel's figure of the stranger while reworking it through a religious existentialist lens. Although he rejects any restorative return to organic community, Kracauer insists on the enduring significance of what has been lost. This tension leads to the concept of a negative community, composed of isolated individuals bound by a shared experience of metaphysical waiting and later social disenchantment. During the second half of the 1920s, this framework becomes increasingly secularized and politicized as Kracauer turns toward mass society, public space, and the emergence of an urban *Publikum*. The article shows how he seeks to move beyond the opposition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* by reactivating Enlightenment ideals while critically addressing mass culture and democratic fragility in Weimar Germany.

KEYWORDS

Siegfried Kracauer; Gemeinschaft; Weimar Republic; Urban Modernity; Mass Culture

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As we know, the category of *Gemeinschaft* was central to political and social philosophy in Germany in the 1920s. The question of the possibility of a community in the modern age cuts across all political and ideological currents and takes a variety of forms. The issue of community cannot be reduced to its authoritarian versions: *Gemeinschaft* is not necessarily *Volksgemeinschaft*, and there are also democratic uses of this notion. This question of community never ceased to preoccupy Siegfried Kracauer in his Weimar years, and I want to analyze the development of his thinking on this point, showing how it is also linked to his analysis of urban modernity. The city is both the place where the original, traditional community is lost and the place where new collective experiences emerge.

The loss of community

In his early writings, Kracauer saw the city as a place of alienation and atomization. In the city, individuals are uprooted. Modern individualism is thought of in a purely negative mode and appears as the consequence of the absence of a relationship to an all-embracing meaning in a utilitarian civilization that represses the metaphysical aspirations of the soul:

I have already shown that the capitalist economic system uproots and isolates people [...]. The soul in its fullness is sidelined, it is worthless, indeed, it becomes ballast that many people dominated by the capitalist spirit ultimately throw overboard.¹

This vision of the hostile impersonality of the modern world is partly inspired by Georg Simmel, but Kracauer criticizes Simmel for not providing a solution. Simmel, a thinker of the big city and an eminently urban thinker, is the embodiment of modern man who no longer has a *Heimat* anywhere. Kracauer's youth essay on Simmel ends strikingly with a portrait of Simmel as a 'transcendental homeless man' and a stranger. It is because he is a stranger, a nomad, that Simmel is a good sociologist, because he sees what sedentary people do not see (this is the epistemological privilege of the stranger), but because he is a stranger, he has no access to the essential dimension of human experience, the living in a meaningful *Gemeinschaft*:

Therefore: however much he knows about the life of those banished to the place, he has not experienced their innermost happiness. He is a thousand times richer than they are, because he passes them by, close and familiar to each of them once, and he is a thousand times

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Georg Simmel*, in *Werke*, vol. 9/II: *Frühe Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, hrsg. Ingrid Belke unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Biehl (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), 259: "Ich habe bereits gezeigt, dass die kapitalistische Wirtschaftsordnung den Menschen entwurzelt und vereinzelt [...]. Die Seele in ihrer Fülle wird außer Kurs gesetzt, sie gilt nichts, ja, sie wird zum Ballast, den viele von kapitalistischem Geist beherrschte Menschen am Ende über Bord werfen."

poorer than they are, because he has no home like theirs. This person is Simmel: a guest, a wanderer.²

When Kracauer speaks of *Heimat*, he is not referring to the idealized rural world in *Heimatliteratur*, but to participation in a community that is itself linked to a transcendent meaning. By taking up the Simmelian figure of the stranger and making it a figure of modern man in general, Kracauer draws Simmel towards a form of religious existentialism, even if the lost community is not linked to any positive religion. This nostalgia for *Gemeinschaft* and transcendent meaning does not exist in this form in Simmel. As we know, Simmel saw the city as a threat to subjective culture, but also as the site of the emergence of new forms of individualism. So, for Simmel, it is not a question of returning to the village community, which he describes in a very negative way, but it is a fact that he also uses very violent terms to describe the urban environment, speaking for example of *Vergewaltigungen der Großstadt*.³ Kracauer's perspective in his first texts is marked by a form of personalism with a religious dimension and by the philosophy of existence. Kracauer's proximity to a philosophy of existence that characterizes the experience of the modern subject as inauthentic is obvious in his criticism of the film *Die Strasse* in 1923.⁴ Kracauer considers the film as a language to be an adequate description of modern urban reality. The big city is the embodiment of this modern world, in which there is no longer any relationship with a transcendent meaning, and therefore no longer any relationship between individuals, or between individuals and things. The modern condition is described as alienation, but it is an existential alienation:

The film *Die Strasse*, which is now being shown in some German cities, shows a world in which the work of connection remains undone. These people in the big city street have no relation to the upper, they are only such an outside as the street itself is, on which much is going on without anything happening. The movement of the figures resembles the whirl of atoms, they do not meet but collide, they drift apart and do not separate.⁵

2 *ibid.*, 270: "Darum: So viel er auch weiß von dem Leben der an den Ort Gebannten, ihr eigenstes Glück hat er nicht erfahren. Er ist tausendfach reicher als sie, denn er geht an ihnen vorüber, jedem einmal nah und vertraut, und er ist tausendfach ärmer als sie, denn er hat keine Heimat wie sie. Dieser Mensch ist Simmel: ein Gast, ein Wanderer."

3 Georg Simmel, "Die Grossstädte und das Geistesleben," in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7/I: *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901-1908* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 118.

4 Siegfried Kracauer, "Der Künstler in dieser Zeit," in *Werke*, vol. 5/II: *Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen 1924-1927*, hrsg. Inka Mülder-Bach; unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Biehl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 232-242.

5 *ibid.*, 236: "Das jetzt in manchen deutschen Städten vorgeführte Filmwerk *Die Straße* zeigt eine Welt, in der das Werk der Verknüpfung ungetan bleibt. Diese Menschen in der Großstadtstraße haben keinen Bezug auf das Oberer, sie sind nur noch ein solches Außen, wie die Straße selbst es ist, auf der sich vieles begibt, ohne das etwas geschieht. Das Getriebe der Figuren gleicht dem Wirbel der Atome, sie begegnen sich nicht, sondern prallen zusammen, sie treiben auseinander und trennen sich nicht."

The social order or rather disorder referred to here is that of *Gesellschaft* as opposed to *Gemeinschaft*. Kracauer recalls Ferdinand Tönnies' definitions in his review of Helmuth Plessner *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* in 1924. This definition includes the word 'Getriebe,' which Kracauer also used in his commentary on *Die Strasse*:

If society is understood as the inorganic hustle and bustle [*Getriebe*] of the soulless, purpose-driven people who move in a world mechanized by capitalism and technology, then Community is thought of as the organic togetherness of all people who know how to put themselves in the right order.⁶

But while insisting on this absence of a community bond, Kracauer considers that community has become impossible. He always makes it very clear that his thinking is not about restoring community and going back to the roots. He clearly criticizes conservative political uses of the category of *Gemeinschaft*. For him, Plessner has the merit of warning against the community fanatics (*Gemeinschaftsfanatiker*⁷) who want to abolish civilization. However, there is in this same review a criticism of Plessner, insofar as for Kracauer individualistic society is not self-sufficient, and can only make sense if it is the expression of a community that precedes society.⁸ There is no *Gesellschaft* without community, and here Kracauer returns to another thinker who had also an influence on him, albeit less visibly than in the case of Simmel: Max Scheler, who thought that society was incapable of producing solidarity on its own: solidarity can only emerge in a *Gemeinschaft*.⁹ At the same time, Kracauer considers that proposals for rebuilding the community are arbitrary and artificial: there is no longer a collective meaning, and we have to take note of this impossibility of community, but we have to remain aware that something has been lost. In the text "Those who wait," Kracauer characterizes this attitude as *warten*.¹⁰ But it is important to see that the city remains the horizon of Kracauer's thinking: those who wait are city dwellers and have no intention of leaving the city. Like Kracauer, they go to the cinema and read crime novels.

6 Siegfried Kracauer, "Philosophie der Gemeinschaft," in *Werke*, vol. 5/II, 148: "Versteht man unter dieser etwa das anorganische Getriebe, der entseelten, nur noch zweckbestimmten Menschen, die sich in der durch Kapitalismus und Technik mechanisierten Welt bewegen, so wird jene als das organische Miteinander der ganzen Menschen gedacht, die sich in die richtige Ordnung zu schicken wissen."

7 *ibid.*, 150.

8 *ibid.*, 151.

9 Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: NUP, 1973), 527.

10 Siegfried Kracauer, "Those who wait," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans., ed., and introd. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: HUP, 1995), 129-140.

The negative community

The critique of the individualistic and impersonal *Gesellschaft* was widely shared in Weimar Germany, even if the presuppositions of this critique and the solutions proposed could be very different. With Plessner,¹¹ we can consider that there were two main responses to this situation: that of the *völkisch* movement with its idea of an organic community based on a common cultural identity, or even on race, and that of communism: in this case, the community had to have a rational and universal basis. But if we look a little more closely, there were also other solutions, such as Christian democracy based on religious personalism. Rarer were the positions taken in favor of liberal individualism. There was also the idea that the first step was to develop elite micro-communities. This conception had a long tradition in Germany and could be traced back at least to Friedrich Schiller's idea of the aesthetic state (*"ästhetischer Staat"*). In general, it was a more cultural than directly political vision of community. In the context of the early 1920s, this position could be compatible with a republicanism of reason and a mistrust, even hostility, towards *völkisch* thought, as in the case of Ernst Troeltsch, who in his *Spectator*-Briefe polemicized very clearly against the idea of a homogeneous community of the people. At the same time, Troeltsch spoke of "germ cells [*Keimzellen*]" to qualify small groups sharing a common spiritual aspiration.¹² In a way, Kracauer is part of this tradition, but in a deliberately paradoxical way. If you read the text "Those who wait" carefully, you will see that Kracauer is suggesting that city dwellers are indeed isolated atoms, but that those of them who are aware that something has been lost, those who are waiting, form a kind of community. However, it is an invisible community that can be described as negative community. But the experience of the loss of meaning does have a collective dimension and creates a bond that unites city dwellers, even if they are not aware of it. Those who wait are a collective; they form a kind of community of destiny (Kracauer uses the word *Schicksalsgefährten*). He speaks of them in the plural, and tells us that there are many of them:

There are a lot of people these days who, although unaware of each other, are nevertheless linked by a common fate. Having eluded the profession of any particular faith, they have acquired their share of the cultural and educational wealth generally available today and tend to live with an alert sense of their time. These scholars, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, students, and intellectuals of all sorts spend most of their days in the loneliness of the large cities. And since they are sitting in offices, receiving clients, directing negotiations, and attending lectures, they quite often forget their actual inner being in the din of

11 Helmut Plessner, *The Limits of Community. A Critique of Social Radicalism*, trans. and introd. Andrew Wallace (New York: Prometheus, 1999).

12 Ernst Troeltsch, "Der Historismus und seine Überwindung," in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 17, hrgs. Gangolf Hübinger in Zusammenarbeit mit Andreas Terwey (Berlin: de Gruyter 2006), 102.

the hustle and bustle and fancy themselves free of the burden that secretly weighs upon them. But when they do pull back from the surface into the center of their being, they are overcome by a profound sadness which arises from the recognition of their confinement in a particular spiritual situation, a sadness that ultimately overruns all layers of their being. It is this metaphysical suffering from the lack of higher meaning in the world, a suffering due to an existence in an empty space, which makes these people companions in misfortune¹³.

Those who wait are isolated, but they aspire to a self that would be common to all humanity. Perhaps when he spoke of those who wait, Kracauer was thinking of the Judeo-German intellectuals who frequented the *Jüdisches Lehrhaus*, of which he was a member at the time. The article "Der Künstler in dieser Zeit," mentioned above, appeared in the first issue of the newspaper *Der Morgen*, founded by Julius Goldstein and intended to be the newspaper of enlightened Judaism. In a way, this idea of a negative community of the companions in misfortune can also be found in Kracauer's essay on *Detektivroman*. Kracauer explains there that the hotel lobby is an inverted image of the assembly of the faithful in the Church. In the hotel lobby, individuals are in a space that interrupts the social "Getriebe," revealing its emptiness. But unlike those who wait, the people in the hotel lobby are not aware of this emptiness. The individuals who form a paradoxical community in the hotel lobby that is unaware of itself.¹⁴ This absence of a community link has consequences for architecture. This is the underlying reason for Kracauer's fight against ornament, because in a German romantic tradition ornament was seen as the expression of community, as a *gemeinschaftlicher Mittelpunkt*, as Friedrich Schlegel puts it.¹⁵ For Kracauer, if ornament is no longer possible, it is because we live in an age of spiritual anarchy, devoid of any relationship to a higher meaning, and therefore incapable of producing a style unlike previous eras. This is why the only possible point of agreement is negative: it is the renunciation of ornament, the nakedness, the simplicity of form. Kracauer uses the word *Kargheit*, and on this point he joins the Werkbund. In an article on the Werkbund's exhibition *Die Wohnung* in Stuttgart in 1927, he describes the attitude of the Werkbund as an attitude of expectation: "Perhaps, say the Werkbund people, a new abundance will come later, but for the time being, austerity is called for..."¹⁶ This idea of a negative community united in loss and mourning will never completely disappear from Kracauer's thought—at least in the Weimarian phase of his work—but in the second half of the 1920s it becomes secularized. In the book about the employees,

13 Kracauer, "Those who wait," 129.

14 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Hotel Lobby," in *The Mass Ornament*, 176.

15 Michel Collomb et Gérard Raulet (dir.), *Critique de l'ornement de Vienne à la postmodernité* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck 1992), 15.

16 Siegfried Kracauer, "Das neue Bauen: Zur Stuttgarter Werkbund-Ausstellung: *Die Wohnung*," in *Werke*, vol. 5/II, 636: "Vielleicht, sagen die Werkbundeute, kommt später wieder eine neue Fülle, einstweilen aber ist Kargheit geboten [...]."

Die Angestellten, the employees are also orphans of disenchantment, but it is a political and social disenchantment. In both cases, we are dealing with alienation, and in both cases the reign of instrumental rationality is a symptom of this alienation, but Kracauer is moving towards a more political and social reading of modernity. If employees are *obdachlos*, it is not because they have lost the link to a higher meaning, but because social and political change has undermined the bourgeois worldview to which they subscribed. The "mass of salaried employees" is "spiritually homeless."¹⁷ Here, Kracauer introduces the concept of mass. The negative community of employees forms a mass, and the term 'mass' is used again and again in *Die Angestellten* to refer to this new social group, which is also associated with the big city. Kracauer emphasizes at the beginning of the book that the expedition into the *terra incognita* of the world of the employees takes us to the heart of the big city.

The mass, the public, the human community

For Kracauer, the notion of mass never has a completely positive connotation. The masses are generally characterized as living in false consciousness, and as a product of rationalized capitalism. In his essay "Das Ornament der Masse," Kracauer distinguishes the mass from the *Volk*. The *Volk* corresponds to an organic community and belongs to the past. If the mass ornament, unlike the traditional ornament, is purely geometric, this is because it is no longer the expression of a living community, but of a rationalized organization that has become an end in itself. However, the fact that this organization produces ornaments shows that it threatens to fall back into myth. Against this threat of a return to myth, Kracauer reactivates the *Aufklärung* project. The goal of history appears to be the establishment of a reasonable human community, what he calls "the advent of the man of reason."¹⁸ The community is no longer a lost religious community, but a community to be built, on reasonable foundations, and this is why Kracauer explains in "Das Ornament der Masse" that capitalism has not rationalized too much, but too little. At the end of the process, we can hope for the advent of a universal ornament.¹⁹ In this text dating from 1927, and therefore from a period of stabilization in the Weimar Republic, Kracauer considers modernity and Germany to be at a tipping point. Either we move towards a kind of alliance between technical rationality and myth, which risks throwing society back into nature, but into a nature that is more brutal than it has ever been, or we continue the process of rationalization, which presupposes that we master and humanize the unleashed instrumental and capitalistic rationality, which nevertheless constitutes a

17 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (London: Verso 1998), 88.

18 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament", in *The Mass Ornament*, 83.

19 *ibid.*, 86.

necessary moment. In this project, Kracauer refers above all to the French *Lumières*, no doubt because he attributes to it—particularly in the criticism of religion—a more radical and ‘materialist’ orientation than to the German *Aufklärung*. At the same time, Max Horkheimer also drew on this tradition of the French *Lumières*.²⁰ For Kracauer, this radicalism was necessary in a country where public space was occupied by myths and worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*). Public space became a central issue in Kracauer’s thinking at the time. The question was how to move from the mass to the rational human community. This is where the notion of the public/*Publikum* comes in, because the mass is also a *Publikum*, an audience. In this respect, it seems to me that one of Kracauer’s original features, which sets him apart in the intellectual landscape of the Weimar Republic, is that in the mid-1920s he tried to go beyond the opposition between society and community by reactivating the Kantian notion of public space. If the city is the place of the masses, it is also the place where an audience is born. This audience is the people who rush to the cinema and consume the new forms of entertainment. In Kracauer, the *Publikum* is no longer, as it was for Kant, the cultivated bourgeoisie taking part in an academic debate, but a massified public in an enlarged public space as a result of the functional democratization of society and the industrialization of the media. We could say the public space has an aesthetic dimension. It is only in the metropolis that this new public can emerge, as Kracauer notes. It is only in the big city that the mass becomes a public:

Masses also gather in the provinces; but there they are subjected to a pressure which does not allow them the spiritual and cultural fulfillment appropriate to their number and real social significance.²¹

What makes the mass a public is that it expresses cultural needs that need to be satisfied and despite its initial reluctance, the bourgeois public is in the process of amalgamating with these middle classes to form the public of the big city, which constitutes a new social entity, a sort of new collective subject:

There is little room left for the so-called educated classes, who must either join in the dining or maintain their snobbish aloofness. Their provincial isolation is, in any case, at an end. They are being absorbed by the masses, and this gives rise to the homogeneous cosmopolitan audience in which everyone has the same responses, from the bank directors to the salesclerk, from the diva to the stenographer.²²

20 Max Horkheimer, “Aufklärung,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9/1: *Nachgelassene Schriften 1914-1931: Vorlesung über die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1987), 346-480.

21 Siegfried Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction: On Berlin’s picture palaces,” in *The Mass Ornament*, 324.

22 *ibid.*, 325.

Of course, in some respects this mass public is a negative community, because it is a partly alienated public. Kracauer is a critic of what Theodor L.W. Adorno and Horkheimer would call *Kulturindustrie*, and as a film critic he leads a campaign against the films of the UFA film company, which he analyses from the angle of a critique of ideology. But at the same time Kracauer considers that there is a positive democratic potential in this new public. He invites his bourgeois readership, that of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, not to despise distraction. The distraction that this audience is so fond of has the merit of corresponding to the current stage of culture, which it is necessary to confront. The reality to which distraction corresponds is that of disorder, of a *Durcheinander*, of what Kracauer calls "*Unordnung [disorder] der Gesellschaft*," but there is something subversive in this *Durcheinander*, which is its dimension of improvisation: for Kracauer, Berlin's cinemas, those palaces of entertainment, must stop imitating theatres: distraction, then, has the merit of *Aufrichtigkeit*, but it also holds out the promise of recomposition. Kracauer tells us that the masses easily allow themselves to be stupefied only because they are so close to the truth. They are closer to the truth than the nostalgic bourgeois.

The pathologies of the public sphere

As his critique of *Kulturindustrie* and the reactionary ideologies propagated by a cinema that obscures social reality shows, Kracauer is aware of the pathologies of the public space. Kracauer considers that in Germany, public debate is polluted by visions of the world that, because of their totalizing ambition, prevent the perception of a common world. Political conflict, which should be about choices concerning real living conditions, is being displaced by cultural wars between *Weltanschauungen*. Architecture is again a symptom of this fragmentation, as can be seen from the way Kracauer comments on plans to build certain monuments, in particular the conversion of the *Neue Wache* into a memorial to the dead of the First World War. He believes that the minimalist solution adopted by Heinrich Tessenow is the only one possible in a country that cannot agree on a common language: "The fact is that we are currently almost completely denied a positive statement [...]. A memorial to the fallen in the Great War: if we want to be honest, it must not be much more than an empty space."²³ For Kracauer, there can be no public space without some kind of pre-political and shared common world, and that is what is lacking in Germany. This is why political confrontation in the Weimar Republic takes the form of a clash of worldviews in which the reality of material conditions is entirely secondary. This is expressed in the text "*Flaggen [Flags]*," written on the occasion of an election day in the Prussian Landtag

23 Siegfried Kracauer, "Tessenow baut das Berliner Ehrenmal," in *Werke*, vol. 5/III: *Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen 1928-1931*, hrsg. Inka Mülde-Bach; unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Biehl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 287.

in July 1932, which appears as a pure clash of symbols:

It started with the swastika flags. They have been silently appearing for a few days, hanging out of windows here and there [...]. In the meantime, shortly before election Sunday, the symbols of the other parties have followed in time [...]. They do not spread cheerfulness, these flags. They wave gloomily against each other, heralding programs that are killing each other and revealing the bitterness that fills the people who seem to walk peacefully among them.²⁴

The big city, which is Berlin, now appears as a place of violence and segregation. Referring to a debate between a representative of the nationalist 'German Youth Order' and a Social Democrat student, Kracauer shows the impossibility of a democratic confrontation of discourses in Germany: "As usually happens in Germany, the dialogue rose to ideological heights, and in the end the idea of a people's state based on self-administration was contrasted with that of a socialist planned economy."²⁵ This diagnosis of the unreality of the debate, of the absence of a common world, explains the nostalgia for a natural community that we sometimes perceive in Kracauer, particularly when he speaks of France. In a 1930 letter to Adorno, in which he expressed concern about the political situation in Germany, he wrote of France, where he was at the time:

It is just that I observe over and over again in France—where, however, there is also plenty to criticize—everything that has been destroyed back home: fundamental decency, good nature as a whole and, along with this, every kind of trust that people have in one another.²⁶

Kracauer finds an image of this pre-political natural community, which does not exist in Germany, in René Clair's film *Sous les toits de Paris*, as shown in the text "Schlager im Exil." In the heart of Berlin, the narrator hears a song being sung in chorus by passers-by on the street: Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris*. This reminds him of a scene of communion he experienced in Paris after the aviators Costes and Bellonte crossed the Atlantic Ocean: this crossing had inspired a song that spread throughout the city. Kracauer had observed in Paris how this song sparked moments of communion that brought together all social classes:

24 Siegfried Kracauer, "Flaggen," in *Werke*, vol. 5/IV: *Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen 1932-1965*, hrsg. Inka Mülder-Bach; unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Biebl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 90: "Angefangen hat es mit den Hakenkreuzfahnen. Seit einigen Tagen sind sie stillschweigend aufgetaucht und hängen hier und dort aus den Fenstern heraus [...]. Inzwischen sind, kurz von Wahlsonntag, die Symbole der übrigen Parteien noch rechtzeitig nachgerückt [...]. Sie verbreiten keine Heiterkeit, diese Fahnen. Duster wehen sie gegeneinander, kündigen Programme, die sich den Garaus machen, und geben die Erbitterung preis, von der die Menschen erfüllt sind, die scheinbar friedlich unter ihnen hinwandeln."

25 Siegfried Kracauer, "Ausserhalb der Universität-Studenten diskutieren," in *Werke*, vol. 5/III, 656: "Der Dialog schraubte sich, wie es in Deutschland meistens geschieht, zu weltanschaulichen Höhen empor, und am Ende stand der Idee eines auf Selbstverwaltung gegründeten Volksstaates die der sozialistischen Planwirtschaft gegenüber."

26 See Kracauer's letter to Adorno dated August 24, 1930, in Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, *Correspondence: 1923 - 1966*, trans. Susan Reynolds and Michael Winkler (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 167.

And when the woman began to sing [...] for the second time, the circle of people gradually joined together to form a congregation that sang along more vigorously from verse to verse. Craftsmen, petty bourgeois women and young lads with caps on their heads: they formed one big family [...].²⁷

It is only later that he recognizes this song: it is the song from the opening scene of *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930), a film that had been a great success in Germany. We are witnessing in Paris the spontaneous birth of a collective subject intimately linked to the city. In Berlin, however, as Kracauer points out, the song is not understood. This song is like an exile in the streets it doesn't know. This song is therefore in exile. Paris is also a place where there is a harmony between the present and the past, while in Berlin there is no relation to history. This feeling of the absence of a shared common world in Germany is also the reason for Kracauer's interest, which may seem strange in retrospect, in the experience of the 'labor camps,' inspired by Eugen Rostenstock and Hans Dehmel on the one hand, and by certain currents of the *Jugendbewegung* on the other. Officially, the idea behind these camps was to bring together young people from all social backgrounds. Kracauer, recounting a visit to one of these camps, certainly refused to consider them as cells of a 'people's community,' which in his view was a romantic illusion and a political naivety. However, he does explain that the *Arbeitslager* could help to create the conditions for a productive discussion:

That is to say, their possible mission does not extend to the political sphere but is limited purely and exclusively to the pre-political sphere. No royal road leads from them to what, in the strict sense of the word, may be called a national community; but they can help create the conditions for real political action [...].²⁸

They do it by encouraging the confrontation of points of view. For Kracauer, then, this encounter not between ideologies but between people is about laying the foundations for a shared perception that is a pre-political condition for the existence of a positive conflict. In the second half of the 1920s, Kracauer still had hope in the dynamics of the public sphere and the emergence of a sort of collective will, but in the 1930s this hope gave way to growing pessimism. In one of his last texts written in Germany, describing the crowd that came to see the Reichstag in Berlin after it was burnt down, Kracauer noted that the individuals who made up this crowd

27 Siegfried Kracauer, "Schlager im Exil," in *Werke*, vol. 5/IV, 451: "Und als dann die Frau zum zweiten Male [...] zu singen begann, schloss sich der Menschenkreis allmählich zu einer Gemeinde zusammen, die von Strophe zu Strophe kräftiger mitsang. Handwerker, Kleinbürgerfrauen und junge Burschen mit der Mütze auf dem Kopf: sie bildeten eine einzige große Familie [...]."

28 Siegfried Kracauer, "Über Arbeitslager," in *Werke*, vol. 5/IV, 201-213: "Das heißt, ihre etwaige Mission erstreckt sich nicht auf das politische Gebiet, sondern beschränkt sich nicht auf das politische Gebiet, sondern beschränkt sich rein und ausschließlich aufs vorpolitische. Kein Königsweg führt von ihnen zu dem, was in des Wortes strenger Bedeutung Volksgemeinschaft heißen darf; wohl aber können sie die Voraussetzungen für ein wirkliches politisches Handeln mitschaffen [...]."

and who belonged to all social classes were silent and did not discuss among themselves, whereas this attack on democracy was supposed to provoke a collective reaction and a collective discussion.²⁹ The clash of worldviews has now been replaced by democratic apathy, paving the way for the reign of propaganda. In his later analyses, Kracauer shows that propaganda aims to establish a pseudo-community that is in fact nothing more than an image and a gigantic ornament of the mass, designed to mask a social conflict that cannot be expressed.

After the Second World War, we still find in Kracauer the idea of human community, particularly at the end of *Theory of Film*, where Kracauer deals with the famous exhibition *The Family of Man*, but I think it does not have the same political dimension as in the Weimarian essays. As I said at the beginning, this discussion of *Gemeinschaft* is linked to the Weimarian context. Significantly, the ideal of the *Gemeinschaft* community disappears in the way Kracauer characterizes the film *Die Strasse* and the way he presents the city: the world depicted in the film is no longer opposed to the impossible community. Kracauer now emphasizes that if the street is cinematic, it is because it is an example of the flow of life.³⁰ Another sign of this depolitization is that Kracauer no longer envisages the cinema audience as a collective, as he did in *Kult der Zerstreuung*: he speaks of the spectator in the singular. Cinema appears to be the medium for the aesthetic education of the individual, and the city, although it remains a privileged object for cinema, is no longer the locus of social and political dynamics, as it was in the Weimar texts.

29 Siegfried Kracauer, "Rund um den Reichstag," in *Werke*, vol. 5/IV, 395

30 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, PUP, 1997), 72.

Olivier Agard is Professor of Germanic Studies at Sorbonne University's Faculty of Letters. He works on the history of German ideas in the 20th century, with a particular interest in philosophical anthropology (Scheler, Plessner, Gehlen). Among his publications, mention should be made of *Siegfried Kracauer, le chiffonnier mélancolique* (CNRS, 2010) and *Elias Canetti* (Belin, 2003).

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MAIN SECTION

Contraband: On the Shades of John Berger¹

Graeme Gilloch — Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Lancaster University, UK
Contact: g.gilloch@lancaster.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I trace and unfold John Berger's enduring fascination with the aesthetics of places and his preoccupation with ghosts and haunting. Starting in Bologna our itinerary takes in Lisbon, London, Paris, rural Poland and a remote village in the French Alps. In Berger's company, we are treated to the tastes and ambiances of these diverse places and to encounters and conversations with a plethora of benign spectres. Three leitmotifs serve as our guiding spirits: *terroir* (the distinctive qualities of locales); the *rendezvous* ('here is where we meet'); and *contraband* (the illicit crossing of borders). In Paris, Berger enters into the paintings of a neglected artist, Rostislav Kunovsky, and invokes two figures who vainly sought to transgress that ultimate prohibition, the separation of life and death: Orpheus and Eurydice. Elsewhere, it is also for the sake of love, that Lucie Cabrol returns to haunt her one-time lover Jean. She smuggles herself as contraband back into the world of the living. Ghosts are contraband. For Berger, any place without ghosts is bereft of memories. The un-haunted is uninhabitable, unendurable, inhuman. To live is to join and jostle amidst a crowd, a city, of shades.

¹ An earlier and abbreviated version of this paper was first presented at the 'Historical City and Urban Aesthetics: Conceptual Frameworks and Public Spaces' conference organised by the *Architectural Humanities* Research Group of the Department of Architecture at the University of Bologna, 12-13 December 2024. I am very grateful to Andrea Borsari, Claudia Nigrelli and Francesco Di Maio for their kind invitation to present and participate at this event.

KEYWORDS

John Berger; Rostislav Kunovsky; contraband; aesthetics; haunting.

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"It's an improbable city, Bologna—like one you might walk through after you have died." (John Berger, 2018)²

"There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in." (Michel de Certeau, 1984)³

By way of introduction...

Introductions are needed when people meet and here is where we meet: Bologna. Here is where our words meet: '*introduction*', from the Latin *introductio* from *intro* ('inward', 'to the inside') and *ducere* ('to lead'). An introduction is a 'leading into,' an invitation, a guided movement and moment; at the same time, it is a ritual of meeting and encounter, of greeting, presenting and acknowledging. Yes, introductions are much needed, and Berger makes much use of them. We will return to this.

Here is where our words meet: English and Italian. In my title, the suggestive word: 'contraband': 'goods that have been illegally or illicitly imported or exported,' introduced into English in the 15th century from the Italian *contrabbando* from medieval Latin *contrabannum*: from *contra*, 'against,' and *bannum* 'decree.' 'Contraband': against the decree, against the proclamation, against the ban, against the prohibition.

What does it mean to say that a word was 'introduced from the Italian'? The word has crossed linguistic borders, entered into a new realm, embarked on a new life, crossed thresholds, moved betwixt and between. Words are smuggled or smuggle themselves into other languages. They migrate, emigrate, immigrate, assimilate. Cunningly. Artfully. Unseen, unsuspected. Sometime before 1590, 'contraband' infiltrated the English language from Italian.

'Contraband,' the very word like so many others, is itself a kind of linguistic contraband.

In *Pig Earth* (1979), the first book of John Berger's *Into Their Labours* trilogy, the diminutive yet remarkable figure of Lucie Cabrol—'La Cocadrille'⁴ as she is unkindly nicknamed by her scandalized and ostracizing neighbours in the tiny French alpine village where these stories are set—becomes an inveterate and accomplished smuggler. She learns to ferry all manner of foraged mountain foods and seasonal plants—mushrooms, wild berries,

2 John Berger, *The Red Tenda of Bologna* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007), 19.

3 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 108.

4 "It was in the last year at school that Lucie was given the nickname of the Cocadrille. A *cocadrille* comes from a cock's egg hatched in a dung heap. As soon as it comes out of its egg, it makes its way to the most unlikely place. If it is seen by somebody it has not seen, it dies. Otherwise, it can defend itself and can kill anything it chooses, except the weasel. The poison, with which it kills, comes from its eyes and travels along its gaze." John Berger, *Pig Earth* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1979), 98.

nuts, herbs, flowers, holly and mistletoe at Yuletide—to the markets of the city just across the border, the city of B., some two hours away by the slow train. And then, homeward-bound, cigarettes and other taxable items are concealed about her person.

Smuggling has made her rich though she lives in the dilapidated house of the former road mender on the outskirts of the village, banished there by her neighbours who, one assumes, rely on her nevertheless for their cut-priced smokes.

But in the final story, the third of the ‘three lives’ of Lucie Cabrol—a trilogy within a trilogy—she smuggles herself, becomes contraband herself, to cross a rather different threshold, one which is assumed to require no policing by border guards or customs officers, where there is no-one on duty to collect the duty.

We will return to this, too.

Bologna

Here is where we meet so let us begin here, in Bologna.

In the series of brief and fragmentary reflections composing his *Red Tenda of Bologna* (2018), the artist, sketcher, art critic, novelist and cultural theorist John Berger offers us three intersecting and recurrent themes, leitmotifs which run through so many of his numerous writings: aesthetics; the rendezvous; and haunting.

Aesthetics

A prolific author best known for his pioneering 1972 study *Ways of Seeing*,⁵ Berger is preoccupied with the ‘aesthetics’ of the city. One must appreciate, however, that this is more than, other than, what one might see as ‘ways of seeing’—urban ‘aesthetics’ is to be understood in the much broader sense of ‘to do with the human senses.’ Yes, to be sure, there is the optical—the visual arts are never far from Berger’s thoughts—but the painter and paintings which fascinate him most in this city are principally discussed elsewhere in an essay on Giorgio Morandi and warrant only a passing reference here.⁶ Here, in Bologna, there are other concerns: the smells, sounds, tastes, and textures of this city. His fascination is with the fabric of the city: with its colours, its sensations, its feel. And literally: with *the fabric* of the city: the red *tenda* (another word from the Italian)⁷ are the durable linen awnings of shops which provide shelter from the rain, shade from the sun. Sunshades. These are, for Berger, a characteristic of the city. So much so that that they become his title, so much so that he goes

5 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

6 See John Berger, “Giorgio Morandi (for Gianni Celati)” (1997), in *The Shape of a Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 139–146.

7 ‘Tenda’ also from the Swahili ‘to do.’ It is a Shona name often given to a baby girl to mean ‘gift.’ A female doing, a gift. A female like Lucie Cabrol.

in search of the very material itself. He finds himself in Pasquinis near the Neptune fountain ordering from a bolt of the heavy red linen cloth,⁸ sensing and appreciating its many qualities with his fingertips. There are ways of touching.

There are ways of eating, too. For Berger, Bologna is a city of gastronomy, but not the fine dining of *haute cuisine* and Michelin-starred restaurants—there is no mention of such things; he has no time for them. Rather, his passion is for humble local fare. And so, elsewhere in the city, elsewhere in the text, Berger savours the exquisite taste of Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee bought on the Via Porta Nuova, flavours that linger in the mouth for a full fifty minutes we are told; in the Via Marsala, the best mortadella in the world is to be found, meat cut, not into fine slices, but rather into thick chunks, meat still sometimes flavoured by myrtle berries from whence its name may derive, mortadella to be eaten with a glass of white wine from the Alto Adige,⁹ and to finish, perhaps the best limoncello you will ever drink in the Bocca d'Oro near the Porta San Vitale.¹⁰ Berger not only mentions a light meal of *passatelli* bought in the via Caprarie, he treats us to the ingredients as well.¹¹

How might one think of this attentiveness to, and modest appreciation of, the local cuisine and ingredients that characterise a city, be it the cured pork of the via Marsala or the bowl of sorrel soup he delights in preparing and sharing in rural Poland? Of such soup he writes: “I would place *zupa szczawiowa* somewhere between Warmth and Love. When you sip it, you have the impression of swallowing a place. The eggs taste of the earth of this place, the sorrel of its grass, the cream of its clouds.”¹²

What is it to taste, to “swallow a place”? As I have suggested elsewhere,¹³ a term from oenology, the study of wine, might assist us here: *terroir*. *Terroir* refers to the very specific and distinctive qualities of a wine—its colour, aroma, taste, acidity, its feel in the mouth and finish—resulting not just from the grape variety or blend, but fundamentally from the very specific local conditions in which these were grown: microclimate, altitude, aspect, drainage, and, of course—as the term suggests—the composition of the soil. These combine to impart particularity, individuality, and—for a connoisseur with a trained, expert palate—recognisability. Cities have their own flavours: there are ways of smelling, tasting, savouring. Berger on his food *flâneries* offers us glimpses of Bologna’s *terroir*.

8 John Berger, *The Red Tenda of Bologna* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2018), 23.

9 *ibid.*, 37.

10 *ibid.*, 55.

11 *ibid.*, 35.

12 John Berger, *Here is Where We Meet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 231.

13 See Graeme Gilloch, “Odysseus Impounded: Lost Sailors, Lost Times, Lost Loves,” in *Rethinking the City: Reconfiguration and Fragmentation*, ed. by Maria Filomena Molder, Nélío Conceição and Nuno Fonseca (London: Routledge, 2025), 192-194.

And to be clear: such urban aesthetic pleasures are not the preserve of some aristocratic aesthete. Berger is under no illusions as to the labours that have gone into the production of even the simplest plate of food—and the bloody violence. *Pig Earth* opens with the visceral account of the slaughter and butchery of a pig. There are ways of killing. One must have a sense of and for this, too.

Rendezvous

There are ways of hearing, of listening. Berger is not inattentive to cities as soundscapes and the contrasts between cacophony and silence. Bologna is no exception, indeed here he comes across a special case of acoustics which excites his imagination. He finds himself standing among the pilasters of the Portico di Pavaglione where, leaning against one particular column, it is said you can speak in whispers and still be heard on the other side of the building. Indeed, Berger takes this further: his voice carries not only across space, but seemingly traverses worlds, the divide between the living and the dead.¹⁴ Berger has a “premonition” - “he may come”¹⁵ - and patiently awaits an echo. He is not disappointed. Berger finds himself in the company of his father’s older brother, Uncle Edgar, who makes his characteristically unprepossessing appearance:

Suddenly he’s there. He’s perspiring. He has no jacket. His hands are gently clasped behind his back. He knows about the invisible acoustic telephone. He speaks with the quiet confidence of somebody who, talking to themselves, knows he will be heard.¹⁶

Elsewhere we find this description:

[Edgar was] a man of learning who never stopped learning, a man of ideals who never despaired, a man whom everyone, including my mother, treated as failure, a man with a wart on the middle finger of his right hand where he held his pen writing hundreds of pages of a book that nobody ever read or published.¹⁷

And Berger loved him, of course.

And so, here in the Pavaglioni, John and his Uncle Edgar hold hushed discussions: on the fates of martyrs and the martyrdom of St Ursula, as well as less elevated, less esoteric matters—the merits of the imported coffee and the local limoncello.

Edgar appears and vanishes. “Only the pilaster now. He’s gone. In my ears only the sounds of the city”—and with this departure, Berger concludes his Bologna reflections.

¹⁴ Berger, *The Red Tenda of Bologna*, 44-45.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷ Berger, *Here is Where We Meet*, 36.

Such curious encounters, such serendipitous and felicitous rendezvous—and a rendezvous is both the meeting itself and the place of meeting—are the leitmotif of the interlinked essays forming the aptly titled *Here is Where We Meet* (2005). And always and everywhere, here, there, elsewhere, in cities or on the wooded banks of quiet rivers, these occasions occasion conversations and memories. They are part colloquium and part mnemonic.

Here is where we meet and there are ways of meeting: in a park in Lisbon, Berger sees an old woman with an umbrella: “She had the kind of stillness that draws attention to itself. Sitting there on the park bench, she was determined to be noticed.”¹⁸ She stands and walks towards him employing the umbrella as a walking stick. He recognises her step immediately: it is his mother. He is astonished. It is the most unexpected and unlikely of rendezvous. What is she doing here of all places, of all cities? She is out of place. Indeed, she has never been here, she has never spoken of Lisbon, Lisbon a city which, Berger tells us, has a particular visual quality, a special configuration of the perceptible and imperceptible, a peculiar combination of decorative disorientation and disappearing act. He observes:

Lisboa is a city which has a relationship with the visible world like no other city. It plays a game. Its squares and streets are paved with patterns of white and coloured stones, as if, instead of being roads, they were ceilings. Its walls, both indoors and outdoors, are covered with the famous *azulejos* tiles wherever you look. [...] The tiles of the city draw attention to what can be seen.¹⁹

But this is superficial, sequestering. Berger continues:

their crackly white ceramic surfaces, their vivacious colours, the mortar joints around them, the repeated patterns, all insist upon the fact that they are covering something up, and that whatever is behind them or beneath them, will remain, thanks to them, invisible and hidden forever!²⁰

Berger was not seeking, and his mother was not hiding. Nevertheless, the game is afoot. Here is where they meet and so here is where she takes his arm and they stroll together through the city. He has questions. They converse a little, reminisce a little, relive old times—childhood trips and treats, a Croydon childhood around 1940. This is not nostalgia—“Vienna is the capital of nostalgia” Berger tells us, while *Lisboetas*, by contrast, “talk of a feeling, a mood, which they call *saudade*.”²¹ An aged and frail flaneuse, she tells him of where she has been and what she has seen in this city: the trams, the lift of the Santa Justa, getting lost, wrong turns. He asks as to the whereabouts of his father—he is elsewhere it seems. Elsewhere is

18 *ibid.*, 2.

19 *ibid.*, 10.

20 *ibid.*, 10.

21 *ibid.*, 13.

never far away, it is always another potential rendezvous. It is only a

matter of time, and time is a secondary matter.²² In any case, his mother has chosen to be here, in Lisbon.

"It's not any place, John, it's a meeting place," she tells him. But why Lisbon exactly? "This is not a city, my boy, which fucks itself up. That's why I'm here."²³

And so this is where they meet, John and his mother, meet again and again, in the course of the following days. She comes and goes—amidst the crowds watching a half marathon she is a small child who takes his hand. Later, she is—or at least speaks with the voice of—a seventeen-year-old girl. There are smiles and there are tears; there are discussions of her first marriage to 'Alfred,' there is some philosophizing on freedom, fearlessness, and much more on fish recipes. Together they go "botanizing on the asphalt" as Walter Benjamin once put it.²⁴ And each time, just as suddenly as Uncle Edgar vanishes, she too is gone and Berger finds himself alone. Here is where we meet, here is where we part and depart.

Here is Where We Meet begins on the banks of one river, the Tagus, and ends on the banks of another, the Szum, a tributary of the Tenew River in south-eastern Poland (or 'Little Poland'). One leads to another, one recalls yet another: the Szum reminds Berger of the Ching, the brook near which Berger spent his first six years living on Gordon Avenue in Highams Park: a Chingford childhood around 1930. Rural central Europe flows into inter-war London, his relations with his father who took him fishing, and the girl next door, Camellia, who took him on adventures in nearby Epping Forest and taught him the names of natural living things, the flora and fauna, the *terroir* of the Essex border.²⁵

Here by the Szum, in an old wooden house, Berger finds an old pamphlet in a cupboard drawer, 'Centralism and Democracy' by a young Polish woman known by the name of Rosa Luxemburg, a chance find that sets in train yet more reflections on other waters—the Landwehr Canal in Berlin where her body was so callously dumped in January 1919.

Here by the Szum, he picks the sorrel for the soup he is preparing for his friends Mirek and Danka and their baby, Olek. At their recent wedding, while taking a turn outside, Berger chances upon a musician who

22 "For nomads," Berger writes, "the notion of past and future is subservient to the experience of *elsewhere*. Something that has gone, or is awaited, is hidden elsewhere in another place" (*ibid.*, 141), somewhere behind the other patterns of different tiles perhaps.

23 *ibid.*, 7 and 18

24 See Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (1938), trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings. Volume 4 1938-1940* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2003), 19.

25 My own memories are set in train—I grew up here too. Such a coincidence makes for a *punctum*. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1993).

has come hoping to play, none other than the saxophonist Félix Bertier, a member of the local brass band from a village near Berger's French alpine home.

Motorbiking along a main road, Berger comes to a stop at traffic lights in the town of Kielce. A car draws alongside. At the wheel, shoes kicked off, driving barefoot, is "Liz," a former lover.²⁶ He remembers the wordless evenings, "Hundreds of evenings"²⁷ they spent together listening to "Bartok, Walton, Shostakovich, Chopin, Beethoven."²⁸ He passes her car, she follows for a stretch and then they stop, reminisce a little, and then... and then Berger is back in the house, happy to be taking off his thick biking boots.

A few miles to the south, in Krakow, another rendezvous, another bowl of soup—borsch this time—eaten sitting at a wooden table outside on the Place Nowy. He is joined by Ken, a New Zealander, a man he has seen only once in the last forty years:

When I first met him I was eleven and he forty. For the next six or seven years he was the most influential person in my life. It was with him that I learnt to cross frontiers. In French there is the word *passeur*—often translated as ferryman or smuggler. Yet there is also the connotation of guide, and something of the mountains. He was my *passeur*.²⁹

We will return to the *passeur* and, indeed, to a *passeuse*.

Haunting

Here is where we meet—time and time again, in the most unlikely places. And what do these seemingly random, yet oft repeated rendezvous have in common? What do they share?

These unanticipated assignations—with his mother in Lisbon, his Uncle Edgar in Bologna, Liz in Kielce, with Félix at the wedding, with Ken in Krakow and with many others too (Tyler, "Sir" while waiting for a friend, Juan, in the bar of the Ritz Hotel in Madrid)—these are all encounters with the long dead. They are all ghosts. These are visitations. Berger visits these places, these cities, and he is in turn visited by figures from his past. The curious acoustic 'telephone' in the Pavaglione connects not only the 'here' and the 'there,' but also the 'now' and the 'then.' Not just long-distance, 'long-time' too. The here and the hereafter to be precise.

'Rendezvous' is both a verb and a place. 'Haunt' shares this felicitous doubling: ghosts haunt the living and the living frequent their favourite haunts. Berger is himself fond of such ambiguities, such ambivalences, such

26 Berger, *Here is Where We Meet*, 167.

27 *ibid.*, 169.

28 *ibid.*, 168.

29 *ibid.*, 80.

equivocations. On one occasion, he writes of what he terms a 'Hamlet-object': a father fashions his beloved daughter Eve a pocket-knife, but he is fearful and so makes it with two blunt edges to ensure she will never accidentally injure herself. Blades designed not to cut. An object of indecision, at odds with itself.

Berger's writings take us on a tour of his favoured haunts and of those who haunt him, his favourites. Here at least, the dead appear to him not as figures of trauma, suffering and catastrophe—even those like Tyler around whom the suspicion of a sorrowful end, suicide, hangs heavy—but rather as benign ghosts, gentle spirits, the shades of intimates and acquaintances. Indeed, they are good company; they are, and they make for, good spirits. And they are untethered to places and spaces. These are fancy-free ghosts. Let us call them free spirits.

In Lisbon, John's mother takes care not to trip as they approach the top of the Mãe d'Água stairway, though one wonders what harm she could come to. She tells him:

"There's something, John, you shouldn't forget—you forget too much. The thing you should know is this: the dead don't stay where they are buried."³⁰

"The dead when they're dead," she continues, "can choose where they want to live on Earth, always supposing they decide to stay on the Earth."³¹

He wants to know more.

How do the dead choose where they want to stay? She didn't answer, instead she gathered up her skirt and sat down on the next step of the staircase.

I've chosen Lisboa! She said, as if repeating something very obvious.³²

And Father? Berger enquires.

I don't know and I don't ask him. I fancy he may be in Rome.

Because of the Holy See?

For the first time she looked at me, the little triumph of a joke in her eyes.

Not at all: because of the tablecloths!³³

Berger responds in kind:

So time doesn't count, and place does? I said this to tease her. When I was a man, I liked teasing her and she went along with it, consenting, for it reminded us both of a sadness that had passed.³⁴

These hauntings, these spirits, are of a past sadness and a sadness that

30 *ibid.*, 3.

31 *ibid.*, 4.

32 *ibid.*, 4.

33 *ibid.*, 5. There must be something about the fabrics of Italian cities: tablecloths in Rome, tenda in Bologna.

34 *ibid.*, 5.

has passed. Figures more of former mourning than of unending melancholy.

There are ways of seeing spectres. There are ways of haunting. Not all spirits are free. There are other ghosts and 'ghostly matters,' too. And these are not playful but play a different role—serious spirits, unquiet spirits. Back in Bologna, the conversation with Uncle Edgar about martyrs is occasioned by a particular encounter: *en route* to Pasquinis Berger chances upon:

a long high wall with several thousand black and white photographs, behind glass, displayed on it. Portraits of men and some women, with their names and dates of birth and death printed across the bottom of their chests, where one might listen to their hearts if one had a stethoscope. They are arranged in alphabetical order. Mid twentieth century. How many foresaw their portraits being placed along with thousands of other martyrs, side by side, row above row, on a public wall in the city centre? More than we might guess. In alphabetical order they knew what was at stake: in this area of Italy one out of every four anti-fascist Partisans was to lose her or his life.³⁵

How might one think of this memorial mural, this photographic album of the partisan dead? It attests to the essential sense of past struggles and sufferings, of history as catastrophe and trauma, of contestation and courage, a sense of and sensitivity to what Benjamin in his famous theses "On the Concept of History" terms the ever-endangered "tradition of the oppressed."³⁶ Such sober senses are essential to urban aesthetics and histories. This precious and precarious "tradition of the oppressed" must be smuggled into the present for it is precisely that which is forbidden, prohibited; it is that which defies the ban, contravenes the rules, pays no duties. It is contraband.

Yes, there are ways of remembering, ways of redeeming. But there are also ways of forgetting. And here is where they meet: in Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*.³⁷ These are places of a certain kind of memory, of commemoration sanctioned by government, forms of collective, public recollection in the service of nation-building which in so doing may obscure and occlude—like those decorative tiles in Lisbon—other, more critical, transgressive modes of remembering and reflecting, ones that do not consider the past to have passed, ones attuned to haunting.

Might such spaces risk consigning these partisans and their fight against Fascism to the *then*, as if Fascism itself was only a thing of former times, as if Fascism were finished, over and done with? In his 1940 theses,

35 Berger, *The Red Tenda of Bologna*, 24.

36 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*. Volume 4, 392.

37 See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989), 7-24.

Benjamin also cautions us: "The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious."³⁸

Fascism has its ways too, its worming ways back into the present. There are ways of forgetting this and ways of allowing such forgetfulness.³⁹ Nora's *lieux de mémoire* are places of both memory and amnesia, of equivocation and ambivalence: they are 'Hamlet-places.'

The aesthetic, the rendezvous, the ghost, and the never to be forgotten—here is where they meet, here in Bologna.

Orpheus

Thresholds are 'Hamlet-places,' too: they are boundary markers of separation and, at the same time, spaces to be crossed. In *Confabulations* (2016) under the title "Pieces of Silver,"⁴⁰ Berger recalls a visit to a Paris-based artist whose work he has long revered, one whose studio is not to be found in some shabby-romantic garret in Montmartre, but rather in a tiny apartment lost amidst a banal housing complex far out in one of the city's unprepossessing *banlieue*. Stepping into a room measuring just thirty square metres, crammed with large canvases, Berger introduces us to the Czech-born painter Rostia Kunovsky and his artworks. Berger writes:

Entering the studio was like entering a bunker for soiled linen. Against all four walls were stacked canvases and gigantic sheets of thick paper, all the images painted on them facing the wall. The floor was covered with other paintings laid face down. No question of strolling around. I sat on a chair by the door.⁴¹

He is enthralled by Kunovsky's works, ones which, in three series—*Fenêtres Lettres* (2011), *Derniers Travaux* (2013), and *from Nowhere* (2015)—repeat, reiterate and reconfigure the same background motif. One sees row upon disorganised row of boxes of various dimensions, a manic multiplicity, an unending *favela* or high-rise suburb, a *banlieue*, seemingly climbing up a hillside, filling the canvas entirely, sprawling beyond its frame to

38 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 391.

39 In an essay entitled "How to Resist a State of Forgetfulness," in *Confabulations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2016), 140-141, Berger writes: "around us, the planet is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands; the majority are underfed, junk-fed or starving. More and more millions of people are being forced to emigrate with the slimmest hopes of survival. Working conditions are becoming more and more inhuman. Those who are ready to protest against, and resist, what is happening today are legion, but the political means for doing so are for the moment unclear or absent. They need time to develop. So we have to wait. But how to wait in such circumstances? How to wait in this state of forgetfulness?" He adds: "sustained by what we have inherited from the past and what we witness, we will have the courage to resist and continue resisting in as yet unimaginable circumstances. We will learn to wait in solidarity" (ibid., 142-143).

40 John Berger, "Pieces of Silver," in *Confabulations*, 123-131.

41 ibid., 125-126.

encompass everything and everywhere. There are no spaces, no gaps, no crevices. The crowd and confusion of cubes obliterates everything, like the tiles in Lisbon but without the mortar joints and cracks to suggest something hidden beneath. Stacked one upon the other, Kunovsky presents us with a white city of blank, miniature towers bearing black slits for windows and splashed with bright, vibrant colours, all huddled together in ramshackle layers, tier after tier as if these buildings were somehow perched upon one another, rising skywards. There is a suggestion of unkempt bookshelves here, pages with ink penned by a careless hand, textual fragments of an unknown language, storeys of stories. In a short text accompanying an exhibition of *Fenêtres Lettres* in 2011, Berger perceives something of Pieter Breughel and refers to them as veritable “Towers of Babel.” He writes:

We look down from the altitude of a surveying helicopter. We see roofs, windows, cul-de-sacs, flyovers, streets, roundabouts. No people. But the buildings converge and come together like people and the way they are painted (often in white) is as animated as any street talk you can come across. Then, on to these street-life images, are stencilled, in paint, the syllables and abbreviations of words which cannot be decoded, and these letters are close-up, as if scrawled on the helicopter’s windscreen.⁴²

He adds:

Kunovsky’s paintings are about disturbance, folly, chaos and survival but they are not sinister. In their mood and painterly energy they remind me of certain Breughels, whose subjects were human folly—such as The Tower of Babel, the haphazard nature of human endurance and collective laughter.⁴³

They may not be ‘sinister’ artworks but there is, nevertheless, an air of the dead about them. Perhaps, in monochrome, they would resemble the serried ranks of photographs of the partisan dead forming the memorial mural in Bologna; they certainly call to mind gravestones, some broken, some askew, piled one upon the another bearing illegible inscriptions. Bleached of colour, they would be suggestive of an ossuary or catacomb, where the dust-covered skeletal remains of the long-dead are heaped, skull set upon skull in endless rows, dark sockets for eyes. Not ‘sinister,’ perhaps, but these paintings have an unsettling, unruly and uncanny quality: such cities may be the chosen haunting grounds frequented by boisterous ghosts, free spirits.

And although there are no people, no inhabitants—indeed one wonders if there is any space for them?—there is still much of the living and the

42 John Berger, “Towers of Babel” (2011), <http://www.kunovsky.com/fenestresLettres/index.html#>.

43 *ibid.* (underlined by John Berger).

lively about them, too. Stencilled upon these chaotic cityscapes are other images, outlines, contours, as if this compressed conurbation were but a backdrop, a curtain or screen for the superimposition or projection not just of enigmatic outsized lettering, but also of signs of everyday life and vitality: wine bottles and glasses; correspondence, papers and books, scripts and musical instruments; flowers, bouquets and budding branches; and sometimes outsized human figures too—of street and folk musicians and of children. A small boy becomes a colossus as he stands amidst the hurly-burly of the megalopolis, transforming its edifices into Lilliputian building blocks. In his hands the city becomes a panorama of playthings, a toytown. One might wonder: do these motifs overlay the cityscape? Are they dreamlike emanations, phantasms emerging somehow from an urban unconscious? Are they, like the geoglyphic Nazca Lines of southern Peru, mysterious inscriptions carved into the city itself but only visible from a bird-eye viewpoint, Berger's "surveying helicopter"?

Such outlines fascinate Berger. They are reminders of, and resonate with, his enduring penchants and preoccupations, ones we have already identified here: wine suggests *terroir* and the senses; manuscripts, texts and scores connote writing and the arts; flora recall both the flourishing of nature and Berger's own still-life botanical sketches. And the various figures themselves have a certain mnemonic quality, summoning childhood games and times—even if, to be sure, Berger is no child of the *favelle* or the *banlieue*. These cityscapes are imbued with ghostly apparitions.

Berger introduces us to these paintings which are themselves, for him, nothing less than, nothing other than, *introductions*, ways in: they are *entrancing* and *entrances*. They are meeting places, on the cusp of the 'then' and the 'now.' They are introductions to the threshold—*not* the one-way street—of life and death. These are haunted and haunting canvases, pictures of porosity, 'Hamlet-paintings.' Here is where we meet. They are like the spectres Berger did not expect to encounter, the ones that waylay him in cities, that ambush him in the countryside. Little wonder that his reaction is one of shock, the shock of recognition. These, then, are not just repeated representations of cities: they are, for Berger, suffused with the dizzying, disquieting experiences of metropolitan existence as an everyday living with and among ghosts.

"I was standing in front of a painted image," he explains, "measuring two metres by two, of paradise. And, after a moment, standing still, gasping a little, I entered it."⁴⁴

In these images Berger is brought face-to-face with his own past and passions—this is why he "enters into them" since they are born of him. In the same moment, the same movement, *they enter into him*. There are ways of entering. Here, in these artworks strewn around a cluttered studio, is

44 Berger, "Pieces of Silver," 125.

where Berger meets his memories, rendezvous with his remembrances. Yes, as their title states, these are windows, these are apertures. *They look out*. But they open back, they gaze inwards, too—they are mirrors. Berger is introduced to himself. And Kunovsky is his guide in this clandestine undertaking, as much *passeur* as painter.

Berger claims he has seen nothing like these artworks—but, surely he has: in the repeated geometry of the city, in the play of light and shade, in the palette of colours, he must see the connection to the paintings of Robert Delauney and his many windows onto the city—the works of the short-lived art movement and moment known as Orphism. But Berger remains silent on this. Referencing art histories and tracing aesthetic genealogies and lineages are not his concern here. Tellingly, while Berger makes no mention of Orphism, he nevertheless refers to Kunovsky as Orpheus, the archetypal figure not just of art but also of the redemption of the dead.

In a text dated 5 March 2009 reproduced on Kunovsky's website (under 'Lexicon, 2009'), Berger reflects:

When something asks to be written, as happens with some writers, it arrives not in words, but in a pre-verbal, forbidden way, like a newborn born from the womb of the mother tongue. These fabulous paintings describe the landscape of the preverbal with great precision. There are faces, music, flowers, whatever you want, but not yet the words. To my knowledge, no painter has painted a landscape like this so far. It is in its pure state, but today it is subject to a continual bombardment of noises. Information, disinformation. Through this landscape, my friend Rostia Kunovsky is like a guide who reminds me of Orpheus.⁴⁵

And more: for the figure of Orpheus returns us to smuggling and contraband: for is not Orpheus the primordial smuggler, the most daring crosser of forbidden thresholds, the ultimate transgressor of the prohibited, and Eurydice the most profound, most beloved contraband? He leads her through the bleak and hostile landscape of Tartarus, guides her to the banks of the River Styx. And then? Must they bribe Charon to transport them back to the other side, the realm of the living? After all, the crossing of the Styx is only ever a one-way journey. Return tickets are not available. Must they pay the ferryman to pay no attention to them? Must they plead with and cajole him, Charon the border guard, the river police, to turn his back for just a moment?

Orpheus charms Charon with his song, with his music, his art. Smugglers too must be practiced in their artfulness if they are to pass and pass over, to succeed as a *passeur*. In the absence of a suitable craft, one must perfect one's craftiness. And perhaps there are other ways of crossing. The Styx, like every other river, just like the Szum and the Ching, must have its source. Far upstream, it is perhaps a mere trickle or brook, one which one

45 John Berger, "[s.t.]" (5 march 2009), <http://www.kunovsky.com/expoParis/texteJB.html>

can easily traverse in a simple skip or jump. One careful confident step might suffice so long as no-one is looking.

Contraband

Orpheus the smuggler, the guide, the *passeur*—this figure guides us, finally, after much detour and digression, to that tiny village in French alps, and to the third of the ‘three lives’ of Lucie Cabrol, La Cocadrille, and the astonishing final pages of *Pig Earth*. ‘Detour’ and ‘digression’ should be readily forgiven here: such circumnavigation, such secret paths, are assuredly the only routes through the landscape, through the cityscape. They are the ones that smugglers must know and exploit. There are ways of smuggling and smugglers’ ways.

In her ‘third life,’ her afterlife, the murdered Lucie Cabrol returns from the dead and haunts Jean, her one-time lover from years ago, a man who now, after mixed fortunes and misfortunes in Argentina, has finally returned home. He assumes the role of narrator, of storyteller. They meet; they converse; they walk together. She calls him her *contraband*.

“Pleasure is always your own,” he muses, “and it varies as much and no more than pain does. I had become accustomed to pain, and now to my surprise the hope of pleasure, the hope I had known when I was eleven, was coming from the old woman with the unlit cigarette who called me her *contraband*. Where had my life gone? I asked myself.”⁴⁶

But she is only teasing. *She is the contraband*. She has accomplished her most audacious smuggling venture—as all ghosts do—namely, she has smuggled herself back from the dead and into the realm of the living. She has defied the prohibition, repudiated the ban, outwitted and outfoxed the customs; she has managed the impossible crossing by ways and means that are her secret. She is a *passeuse*. And she is not alone.

She leads Jean high up through the forested alpine slopes where she had once made her home, guides him like Orpheus does Eurydice, and then they descend into a secluded vale where a wooden-framed house is being erected. There are many at work—sawing timbers, hammering nails, fitting posts and joists. They cast themselves ‘into their labours.’ Over there is Marius Cabrol, Lucie’s father, whom Jean had seen on his deathbed many years before.⁴⁷ Here is Armand, drowned in the River Jalent, and alongside him, Gustave who had fallen to his death. With them are Georges who had hanged himself, Adelin, crushed by a tree, Michel killed by the kick of a horse, Joset swept away in an avalanche, Mathieu struck by lightning.⁴⁸ And there are others too—Marius a Brine, Pierre, whose body had been broken beneath a frame, and a young resistance fighter, Saint-Just,

46 Berger, *Pig Earth*, 172.

47 *ibid.*, 163

48 *ibid.*, 164.

a member of the Maquis executed by the Nazi soldiers. It is a sylvan gathering of ghosts, a forestry phantasmagoria. They have all smuggled themselves here, every one of these free spirits.⁴⁹ And they are joined for a while by some of the villagers, by the living, who have come to lend a hand. Here they meet: to build a chalet, to celebrate the wedding which should rightly have taken place so many years before—the marriage of Lucie and Jean. Silently serenaded by a ghostly band,⁵⁰ one revenant weds another. Let us leave them there to their afterlives of love.

Back in the city, the living and the dead keep company, too. On the streets, in the parks, on benches and walls, on thresholds, the dead, like shadows, are only ever one step behind, or just one step ahead. Our shades do not allow themselves to be banned; they refuse to be banished. Contraband, contra-banishment. Here is where we meet. We should at least introduce ourselves for, as Michel de Certeau reminds us, we cannot live without them: “There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.”⁵¹

But we should grant John Berger the last word: “It’s an improbable city, Bologna—like one you might walk through after you have died.”⁵²

Bologna: improbable or not, here is where we meet; here is where we part.

49 “We can become anything. That is why injustice is impossible here. There may be the accident of birth, there is no accident of death. Nothing forces us to remain what we were” (ibid., 165).

50 “How can I tell you what the band played. I could hum the melody and you would not hear it. The bandsmen were dead and they played the music of silence” (ibid., 174).

51 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.

52 Berger, *The Red Tenda of Bologna*, 19.

Graeme Gilloch is Professor of Sociology at Lancaster University. He is the author of three monographs exploring Critical Theory – *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996); *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (2002) and *Siegfried Kracauer: Our Companion in Misfortune* (2015). He is the co-author of *The Cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan* (with Bulent Diken and Craig Hammond [2018]) and has co-edited four collections, most recently *Siegfried Kracauer: Selected Writings on Propaganda and Political Communication* (with Jaeho Kang and John Abromeit [2022]). He has published numerous articles and essays on cinematic, visual and literary representations of cityscapes; memory, haunting and ghosts; and contemporary neo-noir fiction.

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MAIN SECTION

On οἶκος The role of aesthetics in Félix Guattari's urban ecosophy

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

ABSTRACT

This article examines Félix Guattari's ecosophy as a transversalist framework articulating the interdependence of environmental, social, and subjective ecologies, with particular emphasis on its implications for urban theory and aesthetics. Drawing on Guattari's concept of machines and autopoiesis, the study argues that ecosophy extends ecology beyond biological life to encompass technological, social, and semiotic processes, thereby situating subjectivity within transindividual assemblages rather than individualist models. The article clarifies three recurrent ambiguities in interpretations of ecosophy: its distinction from deep ecology, the problematic proliferation of additional "ecologies," and the misconception of a nostalgic return to an original nature. It then explores Guattari's analysis of the city as a megamachine that produces both flows and segmentations, shaping contemporary modes of subjectivation. Central to this reading is the role of the "new aesthetic paradigm," understood not as aestheticization of the social but as an orientation toward sensibility, creativity, and heterogenization of values. By foregrounding urban stratification, media processes, and participatory practices, the article positions ecosophy as a political project aimed at fostering non-segregative, resingularized subjectivities capable of resisting capitalist homogenization.

KEYWORDS

Félix Guattari; Ecosophy; Transversality; Urban Aesthetics; Historical City

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1. Three ecologies, three ambiguities

Félix Guattari used the term ‘ecosophy’ to refer to an “ethico-political articulation [...] between the three ecological registers,” namely “the environment, social relations and human subjectivity.”¹ The texts selected and organized by Stéphane Nadaud in the collection *Qu’est-ce que l’écophilosophie?*² demonstrate both the breadth and the conceptual richness of the ecosophical approach, as well as the enduring and complex nature of Guattari’s engagement with this problematic, which extends far beyond the scope of the slim volume *The Three Ecologies*.³

According to Ernst Haeckel’s classic definition, ecology is the “science of the relationships of organisms with their environment and their conditions of existence.”⁴ Ecosophy can therefore be understood as an extension of this discipline.⁵ Whether the world ‘outside’ the organism is physical, social, or virtual, ecosophy treats these dimensions as determinations of a single reality and analyses their mutual implication. For such an extension to be possible, Haeckel’s conception of the organism must be expanded through the concept of the machine. Driven by a lifelong philosophical concern,⁶ Guattari finds the cornerstone of his ecosophy in Francisco Varela’s theory of the autopoietic machine, which generates its own organization,⁷ and, unlike in Varela’s formulation, is extended beyond the strictly living. In fact, for Guattari, technological machines are always entangled with living beings and with autopoiesis in general; for this reason, they may also be considered autopoietic, albeit by proxy.⁸

A secondary—and complementary—manner of conceptualizing the status of machines within the domain of ecology was proffered to Guattari

1 Félix Guattari, *Les Trois écologies* (Paris: Galilée, 1989), 12-3; Eng. trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, *The Three Ecologies* (London-New Brunswick: Athlone, 2000), 28.

2 Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écophilosophie?*, dir. Stéphane Nadaud (Paris: Lignes, 2013) [abbr. = QQÉ].

3 For a very brief introduction to the topic, see Gary Genosko, “The Three Ecologies,” in Gary Genosko, Eugene B. Young, Janell Watson, *The Deleuze & Guattari Dictionary* (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2013), 31; Gary Genosko, “Ecosophy,” in Gary Genosko, Young, Watson, *The Deleuze & Guattari Dictionary*, 100-2.

4 Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen. Allgemeine Grundzüge der organischen Formen-Wissenschaft, mechanisch begründet durch die von Charles Darwin reformirte Descendenz-Theorie*. Bd. II (Berlin: Reimer, 1866), 286.

5 See Félix Guattari, “Qu’est-ce que l’écophilosophie?,” *Terminal* 56 (1991), 22a-c; réed. QQÉ, 71.

6 See Félix Guattari, “La passion des machines,” interview par Emmanuel Videcoq et Jean-Yves Spanel, *Terminal* 55 (1991), 44-45; réed. QQÉ, 251-259.

7 Francisco Varela, *Principles of Biological Autonomy* (New York: Elsevier-North Holland, 1979).

8 See Guattari, “Qu’est-ce que l’écophilosophie?,” 72; Félix Guattari, “À propos des machines” (1990), *Chimères* 19 (1993), 88-89; réed. QQÉ, 117-118; Félix Guattari, “Félix Guattari et l’art contemporain” (1992), interview par Olivier Zahm, *Chimères* 23 (1994), 16; réed. QQÉ, 168-169; Eng. trans. Stephen Zepke, rev. Andrew Goffey, “On Contemporary Art. Interview with Olivier Zahm, April 1992,” in *The Guattari Effect*, ed. Eric Alliez, and Andrew Goffey (London: continuum, 2011), 51; Félix Guattari, “La passion des machines,” 44b; réed. QQÉ, 253; Félix Guattari, “Les systèmes d’interface machiniques,” *Terminal* 62 (1991); réed. QQÉ, 286.

by Gregory Bateson. Beginning from his research in cybernetics, Bateson proposed an ecology that encompasses the physical and what he defined as 'mind'.⁹ Ultimately, ecosophy can be described as the science of the relationships between machines, the external world, and the conditions of their existence.¹⁰ From this perspective, the individual emerges within a transindividual field, with which it subsequently enters into relation.¹¹

In a 1992 interview, when confronted with the assertion that his "manner of thinking about subjectivity finally puts an end to the primacy given to the concept of the individual (opposed to the socius), as the pivot of postmodern sociologies,"¹² Guattari explicitly reaffirmed the philosophical premises underlying the political dimension of his ecosophy. He explained that he started:

from the idea that subjectivity [was] always the result of collective assemblages, which involve not only a multiplicity of individuals, but also a multiplicity of technological, machinic and economic factors... a multiplicity of factors of so to say pre-personal sensations. The individual [...] is only a particular case of assemblage linked to a certain type of culture, and of social practices. I reject in advance the kind of reductionism which consists in thinking communication and culture result from an interaction between individuals. There is no interaction between individuals; there is a constitution of subjectivity at a scale that is transindividual from the outset.¹³

9 See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); trad. fr. F  rial Drosso, Laurencine Lot, Christian Cler et Eug  ne Simion, *Vers une   cologie de l'esprit*, tt. I-III (Paris: Seuil, 1977-1980). For the passages in which Guattari refers to Bateson, see Guattari, *Les Trois   cologies*, 11, 50 and 68; Eng. trans., 27, 54, 93-94; F  lix Guattari, "Vers une   cosophie" (1992), in *QQ  *, 59. In general, on Bateson and Guattari, see Enrico Mastropierro, "L'art de l'  co: Guattari e Bateson," in *Governare l'ambiente? La crisi ecologica tra poteri, saperi e conflitti*, cur. Ottavio Marzocca (Milano-Udine: Mimesis) 2010: 233-40; Ida Ninni, "Bateson e Guattari. Prospettive utopiche per il presente," *Formazione & Insegnamento* 12, no. 4 (2014), 95-100; Robert Shaw, "Bringing Deleuze and Guattari down to Earth through Gregory Bateson. Plateaus, Rhizomes and Ecosophical Subjectivity," *Theory, Culture and Society* 33, no. 7-8 (2015), 151-171; Sergio Ferlito, "L'ecologia come paradigma delle scienze sociali," *Teoria e Critica della regolazione sociale* 2 (2020), 37-59; Jan Jagodzinski, "Thinking Bateson with Deleuze and Guattari. Response-ability of Artisans-Artists-Designers in the Anthropocene," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 17, no. 3 (2023), 387-423; Julie Van der Wielen, "Cybernetic or Machinic Ecology? Guattari's Parting Ways with Bateson," *Environmental Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (2024), 61-89.

10 See F  lix Guattari, "[Rhizome et arbre]," in *QQ  *: 535-538. On the role of the "from outside (*dehors*) as an instance addressed by schizoanalytic reflection, particularly in relation to Guattari's concept of rhizome, in addition to the contributions of Peter P  l Pelbart, "La pens  e du dehors, le dehors de la pens  e. Blanchot, Foucault, Deleuze," in *Deleuze et les   crivains. Litt  rature et philosophie*, dir. Bruno Gelas et Herv   Micolet (Nantes: D  faut, 2007), 39-55; Paolo Vignola, "Deleuze, il fuori e il testo. Percorsi nomadici tra aforismi e rizomi," in *Fuori. Evasione, esposizione, esteriorit  *, ed. Eleonora de Conciliis (Pompei: kaiak, 2021), 35-54, please allow me to refer you to Francesco Di Maio, "L'Arbor    un albero? Umberto Eco lettore di Rhizome, Gilles Deleuze lettore dell'Isagoge," *VS* 139, no. 2 (2024), 377-396.

11 On this topic, which is rooted in Simondonian thought within the context of contemporary French philosophy, allow me to refer you to my *Univocit   e individuazione. Gilles Deleuze lettore di Giovanni Duns Scoto* (Senigallia: Ventura, 2023), 171-216.

12 F  lix Guattari, "F  lix Guattari et l'art contemporain," 3; r   d *QQ  *, 150; Eng. trans., 40.

13 *Ibid.*, 3-4; r   d *QQ  *, 150; Eng. trans., 40-41.

Foregrounding these aspects allows us to avoid three recurrent misunderstandings concerning Guattarian ecosophy. Firstly, it clarifies the distinct differences between Guattari's philosophical project and other synonymous doctrines that have been described as ecosophical in recent decades.¹⁴

An important exception, however, is the ecosophy of Arne Næss,¹⁵ with which there has been a greater dialogue and mutual influence, at least at the level of critical reception.¹⁶ Næss distinguishes between deep ecology—understood as the genuine form of ecosophy, which seeks to rethink the place of human beings within natural processes—and shallow ecology,¹⁷ which may be likened to what Yves Citton defines as “managerial (*gestionnaire*) ecology.”¹⁸

Although Guattari resolutely rejects liberal approaches to nature grounded in exchange value and capitalist exploitation, it must nonetheless be emphasized that, unlike Guattari, Næss does not develop a sustained reflection on nature in relation to sociological and technological dimensions.

This absence tends to encourage an idealization of “wilderness,” exemplified by the Norwegian mountains, and implicitly evokes a mythical golden age to which humanity might supposedly return—aspects that Guattarian ecology drastically rejects, as we will see.¹⁹

14 See, e.g., Michel Maffesoli, *Matrimonium. Petit traité d'écosophie* (Paris: cnrs, 2010); Michel Maffesoli, *Écosophie. Une écologie pour notre temps* (Paris: Cerf, 2017). Other ‘ecosophies,’ focusing on σοφία understood as wisdom directed towards οἶκος, find their centre in the dimension of the sacred. The most famous example is that of Raimon Panikkar, *Ecosofia. Para una espiritualidad de la tierra* (San Pablo: Madrid, 1994); Raimon Panikkar, *Ecosofia. La sabiduría de la Tierra* (Barcelona: Fragmenta, 2021). See also, under various headings, Luciano Valle, *Dall'ecologia all'ecosofia. Percorsi epistemici ed etici tra Oriente e Occidente, tra scienza e saggezza* (Como: Ibis, 2011); Jean-Yves Leloup, *Vers une écologie intégrale. Écologie et écosophie* (Toulouse: uppr, 2018; réed. Paris: Entremises, 2020); Luciano Dottarelli, *Ecosofia. Sapienze della terra per la coltivazione dell'umanità* (Grotte di Castro: Annuli, 2021). It should be noted that Gregory Bateson already believed it necessary to integrate the dimension of the sacred in order to perfect his ecological epistemology. See Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear. Toward an Epistemology of the Sacred* (New York: Hampton, 1987). Other uses of the term ‘ecosophy,’ not further detailed, can also be found in the titles of Gianluca Cuzzo, *A spasso tra i rifiuti. Tra ecosofia, realismo e utopia* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2014), and Giovanni Leghissa, *Postumani per scelta. Verso un'ecosofia dei collettivi* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2015).

15 See Arne Næss, *The Selected Works of Arne Næss, vol. 10, Deep Ecology of Wisdom. Explorations in Unities of Nature and Cultures. Selected Papers*, ed. Harold Glaspey, Alan Drengson, Arne Næss, and Bill Devall, George Sessions (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005).

16 See, e.g., the seminar work of the Italian research group ubimior, such as *Ecosofia. Percorsi contemporanei nel pensiero ecologico*, cur. Gianluca De Fazio e Paulo Fernando Lévano (Modena: Mucchi, 2017); *Prontuario di ecosofia. Bibliografie metastabili*, cur. Gianluca De Fazio, Paulo Fernando Lévano e Irene Sorrentino (Senigallia: Ventura, 2019); Prisca Amoroso, *Ecologia* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 2023); *Soglie della visibilità. Ecologie, consumi e sensibilità*, cur. Camilla Bernava e Gianluca De Fazio (Ventura: Senigallia, 2024), as well as the publications of the series ‘mappæmundi – Una collana di ecosofia’ by Ventura Publishing.

17 See Arne Næss, “The Shallow and The Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement. A Summary,” *Inquiry* 16, no. 1-4 (1973), 95-100; now in *The Selected Works of Arne Næss, vol. 10, 7-12*, and “The deep ecology movement: Some philosophical aspects,” *Philosophical Inquiry* 8 (1986), 10-31; now in *The Selected Works of Arne Næss, vol. 10, 33-56*.

18 Yves Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), 45. On this link, see Manola Antonioli, “Les deux écosophies,” *Chimères* 87, no. 3 (2015), 42.

Secondly, it is important to avoid the 'numerology' of ecologies. While the title *Les Trois écologies* may invite further enumerations,²⁰ the desire to foreground additional dimensions of analysis should not lead to the indefinite multiplication of ecological registers (for instance, temporal or linguistic ecologies).²¹ Such additions risk weakening Guattari's proposal, which is grounded in a principle of disciplinary transversality. The maxim *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* thus remains fully applicable to ecosophy.²²

Although the meaning of transversality evolved throughout Guattari's work,²³ its core does not lie simply in interdisciplinarity, but in the capacity to investigate the genesis of objects of knowledge through the interaction of disciplines, their situated applications, and their relations to an external, chaotic field. From an ecosophical perspective, disciplines live and interact in a manner comparable to machines or organisms. Transversality therefore serves to prevent the dispersion and autonomization of registers. If such domains become isolated, they risk being reified and acquiring unwarranted transcendence. Guattari's ecosophy ultimately extends the principle of transversality to the scale of the cosmos—a vision encapsulated in the Joycean term *chaosmosis*.²⁴

19 The distance between Guattari and Næss is analysed not only in Antonioli, "Les deux ecosophies," but also in Silvano Cacciari, "Deep ecology ed ecosofia tra Arne Næss e Félix Guattari," *millepiani* 36 (2010), 23-36; John C. Tinnell, "Transversalising the Ecological Turn. Four Components of Félix Guattari's Ecosophical Perspective," *Deleuze Studies* 6, no. 3 (2012), 357-388; Simon Levesque, "Two versions of ecosophy. Arne Næss, Félix Guattari, and their connection with semiotics," *Sign Systems Studies* 44, no. 4 (2016), 511-41.

20 Franco La Cecla provides an example in his "Postfazione. Le tre ecologie più una: La pornoecologia," in Félix Guattari, *Le tre ecologie* (Casale Monferrato: Sonda, 1989), 49-71.

21 See, for instance, Thierry Paquot, "Tre, quattro, cinque ecologie!," it. trans. Tiziana Villani, *millepiani* 32 (2007), 43-50, following Einar Ingvald Haugen, *The Ecology of Language. Language Science and National Development* (Stanford: sup, 1972).

22 See Félix Guattari, "La transversalité" (1964), *Revue de psychothérapie institutionnelles* 1, no. 1 (1965), 91-106; réed. dans *Psychanalyse et transversalité. Essais d'analyse institutionnelle* (Paris: Maspero 1972; réed. Paris: La Découverte, 2003), 72-85; Eng. trans. Rosemary Sheed, "Transversality," in *Psychoanalysis and Transversality: Texts and Interviews 1955-1971* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 108-102, and 377. See also Andrew Goffey, "Introduction to Guattari on Transdisciplinarity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no. 5.6 (2015), 125-130 and *Deleuze, Guattari, and the Problem of transdisciplinarity*, ed. Guillaume Collett (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2020).

23 See Félix Guattari, "Vertige de l'immanence. Refonder la production d'inconscient" (1992), interview par John Johnston, *Chimères* 38 (2000), 15; réed. qQÉ, 303-327; Eng. trans. "The Vertigo of Immanence. Interview with John Johnston, June 1992," in *The Guattari Effect*, 26-27.

24 See Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose* (Paris: Galilée, 1992; réed. Paris: Lignes, 2022); Eng. trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995). The term 'chaosmos' is a hapax from James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber 1975), 118. Guattari's attention to this term may have been drawn by the French edition of Umberto Eco, "Dalla Summa al *Finnegans Wake*. Le poetiche di Joyce," in *Opera aperta. Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milano, Bompiani, 1962), 215-361; n. ed. *Le poetiche di Joyce. Dalla Summa al Finnegans Wake* (Milano: Bompiani, 1965); trad. fr. Chantal Roux de Bézieux et André Boucourechliev, "De la Somme à *Finnegans Wake*. Les poétiques de James Joyce," in *L'Œuvre ouverte* (Paris: Seuil, 19712), 169-304; Eng. trans. Ellen Esrock, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (Tulsa: University of Tulsa Press, 1982; reprint Cambridge: HUP, 1989).

Third and finally, these considerations counter any interpretation of ecosophy as a call for a return to an originary nature to be defended at the expense of other dimensions of reality. Guattari criticizes the ecological ideology that emerged in the preceding decade, which promoted a fictitious protection of nature compatible with the developmental logic of capitalist states.²⁵ At the same time, rejecting the concept of nature as a foundational category helps to dispel persistent misunderstandings surrounding the theory of the desiring machine, often misconstrued as an uncritical affirmation of egoistic superhumanism.²⁶ The doctrine of desiring machines, as articulated in *Anti-Oedipus* by Guattari and Gilles Deleuze,²⁷ proposes instead a form of radical constructivism that cuts across subjectivities, social relations, and natural processes alike.

As Guattari explains:

The machine is always in dialogue with otherness: in its technological and human environment, but also through its phylogenetic links with the machines that preceded it and those that will follow. This gives rise to a new form of otherness: that which is situated in time. In addition to otherness, the machine establishes finitude: it is born, breaks down, breaks, and dies. For this reason, we [with Gilles Deleuze, in *Anti-Oedipus*] expanded the concept of the machine beyond technical machines to include biological, social, and urban machines, megamachines, linguistic machines, theoretical machines, and even desiring machines. This concept therefore envisages the possibility of the machine abolishing itself.²⁸

“Finitude” and “otherness” thus constitute the two philosophical poles of Guattarian ecosophy. Yet this framework is not grounded in dogmatism or in transcendent instances presumed to resolve, once and for all, the problems of the present. Rather, ecosophy proposes a mode of composition: a

25 This was what Dario Paccino had already analysed and denounced in Italy in the previous decade. See Dario Paccino, *L'imbroglione ecologico. L'ideologia della natura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972; n. ed. Verona: ombre corte, 2021). See also *L'ecologia politica di Dario Paccino. Tra l'imbroglione ecologico e le lotte contro il nucleare*, cur. Gennaro Avallone e Sirio Paccino (Verona: ombre corte, 2024).

26 This misunderstanding is still present in the reception of schizoanalysis. To give an example in the ecological debate, see Manlio Iofrida, “Un dialogo con Alberto Lorenzini sul soggetto, sull'incarnazione e sulla coscienza,” in *Per un paradigma del corpo: una rifondazione filosofica dell'ecologia* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 199: “Everything depends on a subjective perspective, there is no reality and therefore everything is possible: green light for the free production of desire, for Deleuze and Guattari's famous ‘desiring machines!’ Needless to say, nothing could be further from the ecological perspective that you [sc. A. Lorenzini] and I pursue.” On this topic in general, allow me to refer you to my *Univocità e individuazione*, 185-188. A similar misunderstanding can be found in architectural contexts, for example with Marco Biraghi, *Rem Koolhaas. L'architettura al di là del bene e del male* (Torino: Einaudi, 2024), 21-24, 28 notes 22-25, and 61, 75 note 1, and 103, 111 note 8. Here, the theory of desiring machines is associated with the explicitly neoliberal theoretical and practical output of star architect Rem Koolhaas. Explicitly neoliberal, indifferent to social issues and the problems of subjectivity and emancipatory practices and policies, as well as to any ecological sensibilities, this book concludes with a self-referential discourse defending the architect's work and, consequently, the status quo.

27 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe. Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972); Eng. trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York-London: Continuum, 2004).

28 Félix Guattari, “La passion des machines,” 44a; réed. QQÉ, 251-252.

pragmatics of living multiplicities that necessarily implies an anti-universal tension.

In conclusion, the environmental movements with which Guattari maintained a *compagnon de route* relationship²⁹ required a philosophy capable of addressing the novel conditions that emerged from the 1970s onward.³⁰ As René Schérer observed, ecosophy calls for a “new philosophy of Nature,” a “philosophy to come,” which “rings the death knell for ontology as a ‘science’ or ‘approach’ to Being.” More than an ontology, ecosophy is a philosophy of life and nature. Or rather, Schérer corrects himself: “No, there is no ontology; this is what Félix tells us during his speech,” there are only “sets, diversely organized multiplicities, relationships; and they are moving, flowing. They are diversely machined.”³¹

2. Ecosophy and urban stratification

One of the major strengths of Stéphane Nadaud's collection of Félix Guattari's ecosophical texts is that it opens with the article “Ecosophical Practices and the Restoration of the ‘Subjective City.’”³² As Nadaud notes in the French edition, this text constitutes “one of Guattari's most beautiful expressions of his ecosophy.”³³ It foregrounds the central role played by cities—and, more broadly, by the urban dimension—in the contemporary world, and thus underscores the urgency of ecosophical reflection in this domain.

Guattari maintains that one “can no longer be satisfied with defining cities in spatial terms. The urban phenomenon has changed nature. It is no longer one problem among many. It is problem number one: the problem situated at the crossroads of economic, social, cultural, and ideological stakes.”³⁴ This is because the city “forges the destiny of humanity through its social advancements and segregations, the formation of its elites, the future of social innovation, and of creation in all fields.”³⁵

Guattari's sustained interest in urban phenomena—evident throughout his work—has its institutional roots in the experience of the *Fédération des groupes d'étude et de recherches institutionnelles* (FGERI), founded

29 See Stéphane Nadaud, “Félix Guattari l'écosophe,” in Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que écosophie?*, 14-18.

30 Similar political and philosophical concerns can be found in other authors in the decades that followed. See, e.g., Bruno Latour, *Un monde pluriel mais commun. Entretiens avec François Ewald* (La Tour-d'Aigues: Aube, 2005), 56-60.

31 René Schérer, “Les visions écosophiques de Félix,” *Chimères* 76, 1 (2012), 16-17; n. éd. ampl. dans *Théories et pratiques écologiques. De l'écologie urbaine à l'imagination environnementale*, dir. Manola Antonoli (Paris: Presse Universitaire de Paris Ouest, 2013), 13-15.

32 Félix Guattari, “Pratiques écosophiques et restauration de la cité subjective” (1981, 19922), in *QQÉ*, 31-57; Eng. trans. Gary Genosko, “Ecosophical Practices and the Restoration of the ‘Subjective City,’” in *Machinic Eros: Writings on Japan*, ed. Gary Genosko, and Jay Hetrick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 97-116.

33 See *QQÉ*, 31, note 1.

34 Guattari, “Pratiques écosophiques...,” 45-46; Eng. trans., 107.

35 *ibid.*, 46; Eng. trans., 107.

in 1965. This organization was structured around the principle of interdisciplinarity, later adopted by the Centre d'études, de recherches et de formation institutionnelles (CERFI) and by the journal *Recherche*.³⁶ These collectives and workshops brought together not only psychiatrists, ethnologists, students, economists, psychologists, educators, and writers, but also architects and sociologists.³⁷

Within his ecosophical reflections,³⁸ Guattari repeatedly suggests that we are entering what may be called an "urban age,"³⁹ given forecasts that an ever-growing proportion of the world's population will live in urban agglomerations. The "world-city of the new figure of integrated world-wide capitalism is deeply deterritorialized, and its diverse components are scattered across every surface of a multipolar urban rhizome encircling the planet."⁴⁰

Guattari elaborates:

The growth of certain cities, like Mexico City, that in a few more years will reach a population of 30 million inhabitants, and has record levels of pollution and congestion, seems to be up against insurmountable obstacles. Other wealthy cities, like those in Japan, envisage bringing enormous resources to bear upon the remodeling of their layouts. But responses to these problems outstrip the scope of both urbanism

36 Cfr. Sven-Olov Wallenstein, "Genealogy of Capital and the City. CERFI, Deleuze and Guattari," in *Deleuze and the City*, ed. Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, and Jonathan Metzger (Edinburgh: EUP, 2016), 111-27. On FGERI and CERFI, in addition to Félix Guattari, "Pratique de l'institutionnel et politique," in Jean Oury, Félix Guattari, François Tosquelles, *Pratique de l'institutionnelles et politique*, Vigneaux: Matrice, 1985, 46-47; réed. QQÉ, 220-221, see also Janet H. Morford, *Histoire du CERFI. La trajectoire d'un collectif de recherche sociale* (Paris: Mémoire de D.E.A., EHESS, 1984), http://www.editions-recherches.com/special_revue.php; François Fourquet, "The story of CERFI," Site 2-3 (2002), 12-23; Anne Querrien, "CERFI. Four points," Site 2-3 (2002), 11-12; Liane Mozère, "Foucault et le CERFI. Instantanés et actualité," *le portique* 13-14 (2004); François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari. Biographie croisée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007), 97-100, and 109-111; Eng. trans. Deborah Glassman, *Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari. Intersecting Lives* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 267-271, and 276-281; Susana Calò and Godofredo Enes Pereira, *CERFI – Analysis Everywhere. Militancy, Research, Architecture and Psychiatry* (Colchester-New York-Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2025). On the journal *Recherches*, see Stéphane Nadaud, "Recherches (1966-1982). Histoire(s) d'une revue," *La Revue des revues* 34 (2003), 47-76.

37 It was in fact following his meeting with Guattari that Gilles Deleuze began to take an interest in urban issues, which he had only touched upon briefly in his previous works. On this subject, see the detailed reconstruction by Massimiliano Guareschi, "Rilievi geofilosofici. La città nel pensiero di Gilles Deleuze e Félix Guattari," in *Filosofie della metropoli. Spazio, potere, architettura nel pensiero del Novecento*, cur. Matteo Vegetti (Roma: Carocci, 2009), 221-38. See also Ubaldo Fadini, "Deleuze e Guattari 'disambientati'. Su filosofia e città," in *Spazio dell'abitare e la genesi della metropoli nel pensiero filosofico da Kant al Novecento*, cur. Roberto Morani (Napoli-Salerno: Orthotes, 2022), 161-73. On the relationship between ecosophy and urban studies, in light of Guattari's research, it is worth mentioning the work of Tiziana Villani and, more generally, the workshop of the journal *millepiani*. Among the various publications, see, e.g., Tiziana Villani, *Psychogéographies urbaines. Corps, territoires et technologies* (Paris: Eterotopia France/rhizome, 2014); Villani, *Ecologia politica. Nuove cartografie dei territori e potenza di vita* (Roma: la talpa-manifestolibri, 2015); Villani, "Ecosofia. Percorsi di produzione delle pratiche di senso," *millepiani* 32 (2007), 31-41.

38 See Guattari, "Pratiques écosophiques...", 34; Eng. trans., 99; Félix Guattari, "L'environnement et les hommes. Émergence et retour des valeurs ou l'enjeu éthique de l'écologie," in QQÉ: 532.

39 For a critical introduction to the topic, see Niel Brenner, and Christian Schmid, "'Urban Age' in Question," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 3 (2014), 731-55.

40 Guattari, "Pratiques écosophiques...", 37-38; Eng. trans., 101. See also Félix Guattari, and Gilles Deleuze, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), 258; Eng. trans. Brian Massumi, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 212.

and economics, and require the mobilization of socio-politics, ecology, and ethics.⁴¹

These tendencies are inseparable from Guattari's ecosophical framework. Urban overpopulation entails an "evolution of urban mentalities," which in turn makes a "collective reorientation of human activities" unavoidable.⁴² The significance of urbanization for ecosophy lies not only in the environmental footprint of cities, but also—if not primarily—in their role in the production of subjectivity. The urban age encompasses not merely cities but the entire planet. Even if approximately 80 per cent of humanity comes to reside in urban areas, the remaining "rural" population will remain deeply dependent on urban economies and technologies. Consequently, the distinction between city and nature undergoes a profound transformation: so-called natural territories increasingly become sites of tourism, leisure management, second homes, ecological reserves, and decentralized industrial activities mediated by telecommunications.⁴³ What appears to be a clear opposition between the natural and the cultural thus collapses under the pressure of the urban phenomenon. In this sense, we can no longer meaningfully escape to, or nostalgically long for, a pristine "natural" environment. For Guattari, the task is therefore not to oppose the utopia of a new "Celestial Jerusalem" to the harsh realities of the present, but rather to establish "a 'subjective City' at the very heart of these realities, by reorienting technological, scientific, economic, and international ends (in particular the relations between North and South) and the great mass mediatic machines."⁴⁴

Any project of urban life that seeks to avoid engagement with urban spaces by retreating into an imagined form of anchoritism must, from this perspective, be denounced as regressive, if not outright reactionary. As Guattari insists:

It is not a matter of dreaming of a return to the walled medieval cities, but to move, on the contrary, in the direction of a supplementary deterritorialization, shifting the city toward new universes of value, to confer on it as a fundamental goal a production of a non-segregative and resingularized subjectivity, that is to say, ultimately, liberated from the hegemony of a capitalistic valorization solely based on profit. This is not to say that all of the regulations of the market must necessarily be abandoned.⁴⁵

41 Guattari, "Pratiques écosophiques...", 42; Eng. trans., 104.

42 *ibid.*, 34; Eng. trans., 99.

43 *ibid.*, 34; Eng. trans., 99.

44 *ibid.*, 34; Eng. trans., 99.

45 *ibid.*, 39; Eng. trans., 102. Guattari's historiographical basis, specifically regarding the city, is the work of Fernand Braudel: "Throughout history, one cannot speak of a rapport—in the sense that they spoke with one voice—between cities and rural areas. Cities interfered in every area of civilization. Thus, in the 16th Century, there was a veritable proliferation of city models correlative to the emergence of processes of urbanization and the collective apparatuses of the great national capitalistic entities." (*ibid.*, 36; Eng. trans., 100).

Cities and countryside are therefore not to be understood as idealized opposites, one utopian and the other dystopian. Nor should their osmosis imply the negation of their respective specificities. From an ecosophical standpoint, urbanization must be analyzed simultaneously on a planetary scale—within global networks—and at the level of local stratifications, for instance according to densities of agglomeration and modes of subjectivity production. As will become clear below, ecosophy's attention to aesthetics provides a crucial analytical lever in this regard.

Guattari thus characterizes the city not as a homogeneous space of limitless openness, but as a *megamachine*⁴⁶ whose operations generate systolic and diastolic movements of global flows through successive processes of reterritorialization and deterritorialization under capitalism. On the one hand, the city functions as a surface of inscription for flows due to its privileged relation to power. On the other hand, this very relation enables those flows to be relaunched and reorganized. The city is a "threshold of density" of equipments, of "machines of the socius," of their "body without organs." It tends toward a form of pseudo-totalization—an illusory grasp of global flows—that, if fully realized, would risk its own abolition. This desire is most vividly expressed in dreamlike and artistic registers, such as German expressionist cinema or the biblical image of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Rather than advancing a postmodern vision of the city as ineffable and indeterminate,⁴⁷ Guattari reiterates that it is "a spatial projection, a form of reterritorialization, of blockage," in which collective equipment constitutes a "social unconscious" operating across all structures of representation.⁴⁸ The city thus appears as an informational megamachine⁴⁹ that both aspires to an impossible unity of the world and simultaneously organizes flows through segmentation and enclosure.

These dynamics intensify with the emergence of new media, which accelerate deterritorialization while multiplying barriers and boundaries, both material and immaterial. Such processes threaten the cohesion of the socius and transform modes of singularization, producing homogenized

46 See *ibid.*, 42-43; Eng. trans., 105; Guattari, "À propos des machines," 88; réed. *QQÉ*, 115; Guattari, "La passion des machines," 44a; réed. *QQÉ*, 252; Guattari, "Subjectivité machinique plutôt que transcendance," in *Qu'est-ce que l'écosophie?*, 339, and Guattari, and Deleuze, *Mille plateaux*, 533, 571, and 575; Eng. trans., 444, 457, 460, 570 note 55, and 570 note 58. In this regard, see also Gary Genosko, "Megamachines. From Mumford to Guattari," *Explorations in Media Ecology* 14, no. 1-2 (2015), 7-20; Gary Genosko, "Postscript. For an Urban Machinic Ecology," in *Deleuze and the City*, 241-245.

47 On the debate surrounding the definition of cities, see, for an introduction, §§60-98 in Franco Farinelli, *Geografia. Un'introduzione ai modelli del mondo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2003), Eng. trans. Christina Chalmers, *Blinding Polyphemos. Geography and the Models of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

48 Guattari, Fourquet, and Foucault, "Premières discussions, premiers balbutiements," 28-30; Eng. trans., 109-110.

49 This is a thesis that was then taken to its extreme consequences by Friedrich Adolf Kittler, "Eine Stadt ist ein Medium," in *Vienna. Geburt einer Hauptstadt*, vol. III, *Am Horizont*, hrsg. Dietmar Steiner et al. (Wien: BuchQuadrat, 1988), 507-31; Eng. trans. Matthew Griffin, "The City Is a Medium," *New Literary History* 27, no. 4 (1996), 717-29.

and infantilized subjectivities: "[c]ontemporary human beings have been fundamentally deterritorialized. Their original existential territories – bodies, domestic spaces, clans, cults—are no longer secured by a fixed ground; but henceforth they are indexed to a world of precarious representations and in perpetual motion."⁵⁰

From this standpoint, Guattari analyses the possibility of closed reterritorializations, whether around charismatic leaders or in the resurgence of nationalisms. Rather than simply condemning these phenomena, he emphasizes the necessity of understanding the conditions of their emergence and of constructing counter-dynamics oriented toward otherness.

It is in this context that Guattari's interest in late-1970s media transformations should be situated. At that moment, user participation in content production appeared increasingly central, leading Guattari to speak of a "post-media" era.⁵¹ He links these developments to the constitution of "existential territories": provisional anchors produced through refrains that allow subjectivities—human and non-human—to withstand chaotic flows.⁵² Active participation in radio and television thus appeared to him as a possible vector for new relational configurations and for the emergence of novelty and curiosity during what he called *les Années d'hiver*.⁵³

At the same time, Guattari remained acutely aware of the ambivalence of new media. Far from indulging in technological utopianism, nor descending into the depressive depths of specific interpreters,⁵⁴ he increasingly recognized their role in fragmenting and segmenting urban life. In 1990, Gilles Deleuze famously described a city imagined by Guattari in which access is regulated by electronic cards that modulate movement through continuous control.⁵⁵

50 Guattari, "Pratiques écosophiques...", 31; Eng. trans., 97.

51 See, e.g., "Vers une ère post-média," *Terminal* 51 (1990), réed. QQÉ: 429-430; en trans. Alya Sebt and Clemens Apprich, "Towards a Post-Media Era," *Mute*, 01/02 (2012), <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/towards-post-media-era>. On this topic, see Michael Goddard, "Félix and Alice in Wonderland. The Encounter between Guattari and Berardi and the Post-Media Era," *Generation-online* (1996), <https://www.generation-online.org/p/fpbifo1.htm>; Bernard Prince, and Emmanuel Videcoq, "Félix Guattari and Post-Media Arrangements. The Experience of Radio Tomato and Minitel Alter," *Multitudes* 2, no. 21 (2005), 23-30; Sara Baranzoni, "Leco di Guattari: ambiente, soggettività e tecnologie nel XXI secolo," in *Ecologia. Teoria, natura, politica*, cur. Igor Pelgreffi (Tricase: Youcanprint, 2018), 139-160; Benjamin Bandosz, "Potentialities of Post-Media: Networks of Resistance and Subjugation in Félix Guattari's *A Love of UIQ*," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 15, no. 1 (2021), 117-139; *Deleuze, Guattari and the Schizoanalysis of Postmedia*, ed. Joff P.N. Bradley, Alex Taek-Gwang Lee, and Manoj N.Y. (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2023).

52 On refrain, see Deleuze, and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, 381-433; Eng. trans., 310-350.

53 See Félix Guattari, *Les Années d'hiver*. 1980-1985 (Paris: Barrault, 1985; réed. Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2009).

54 The reference is to Franco "Bifo" Berardi, who hoped for "a non-depressive consciousness of depression" at the end of his "Introduzione," in Félix Guattari, *Caosmosi* (Genova: costa&nolan, 20072), 12. The proponent who developed this line in the most philosophically robust manner is arguably Paolo Godani in his *Melanconia e fine di mondo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2025). Regarding Guattari's depression, see Nadaud, "Félix Guattari l'écosophe," 11, note 1, *contra* Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari*, 27; Eng. trans., 14-15.

55 Gilles Deleuze, "Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle" (1990), in *Pourparlers 1972-1990* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 46; Eng. trans. Martin Joughin, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: CUP, 1995), 180-181.

The multiplication of enclosures is therefore not accidental, but intrinsic to capitalist development.⁵⁶ Because the city simultaneously produces flows and segmentarity, it constitutes a privileged site for ecosophy to analyze the production of subjectivity in relation to media and to changing conceptions of nature.

The political task, accordingly, is to intervene within media production to foster a new collective sensibility, consonant with what Guattari calls a “new aesthetic paradigm.”⁵⁷ Values such as solidarity, neighborliness, mutual aid, and the active construction of existence are, for him, “endangered species.” An ecosophy that is not merely managerial must therefore work to preserve and cultivate these immaterial forms of life. As Guattari asks:

[i]s there a way of living, a possible inventiveness in the realm of immediate social life, aesthetic collective life, etc.? The concept of “practice” has been undermined. If we do not reinvent practices of solidarity, practices of constructing existence, there is a risk of falling into a catastrophic depression.⁵⁸

3. New aesthetic paradigm and urban aesthetics

Félix Guattari’s concept of aesthetics explicitly refers to the etymology of the Greek term *αἴσθησις*, meaning “sensibility” or “perception,” as it was understood when Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten first introduced it as the name of a philosophical discipline. Guattari’s reflections therefore concentrate on the dynamics of sensation through which subjectivities are formed. The “new aesthetic paradigm” aims to provide an alternative to the paradigm of exchange value as a transcendent instance by moving toward a heterogenization of values.⁵⁹ Although Guattari draws direct inspiration from modern and contemporary art,⁶⁰ his ultimate focus

56 For further insight into this topic, refer to the research conducted by Pierpaolo Ascari, *Corpi e recinti. Estetica ed economia politica del decoro* (Verona: ombre corte, 2019).

57 See Félix Guattari, “Le nouveau paradigme esthétique,” in Guattari, *Chaosmose*, 137-163; en trans. “The new aesthetic paradigm,” in *Chaosmosis*, 98-118. See also Félix Guattari, “Chaosmose, vers une nouvelle sensibilité” (1992), *Art actuel* 72 (1999), 19b, and 21b; réed. *QQÉ*, 89, and 98; Guattari, “Combattre le chaos,” interview par Marco Senaldi (1992), trad. fr. Anik Kouba, *Chimères* 38 (2000), 31-33; réed. *QQÉ*, 99-102; Guattari, “Vers une autopoïétique de la communication,” *Futur antérieur* 11 (1992), 38; réed. *QQÉ*, 143; Guattari, “Félix Guattari et l’art contemporain,” 2, 10-12, and 14; réed. *QQÉ*, 159, 163, and 166; Eng. trans., 45-59; Guattari, “Vertige de l’immanence,” 19, 21, and 24; réed. *QQÉ*, 311, 315, and 319; Eng. trans., 32-34. See also Janell Watson, “Chaosmosis. An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm,” in *The Deleuze & Guattari Dictionary*, 62-63; Manola Antonoli, “What is Ecosophy?,” Eng. trans. Stephanie Daneels, in *Schizoanalysis and Ecosophy. Reading Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2017), 74-86; Colin Gardner, and Patricia MacCornack, “Introduction,” in *Ecosophical Aesthetics. Art, Ethics and Ecology with Guattari*, Gardner, and MacCornack (ed.) (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1-28. That the concept of paradigm is explicitly borrowed from Thomas Samuel Kuhn is stated in Félix Guattari, “O paradigma estetico” (1991), interview by Fernando Urribarri, port. trans. Arthur Hyppólito de Moura, rev., and reed. Suely Rolnik, *Cadernos de Subjetividade* 1, no. 1 (1993), 30a.

58 Félix Guattari, “L’imagination au pouvoir,” interview par Guy Behloubu, *Le Lien social* 181 (1992); réed. *QQÉ*: 349.

59 Guattari, “Combattre le chaos,” 31-33.

60 On ecosophy and art, with a focus on the post-media era, see Roberto Barbanti,

remains on everyday experience, of which art constitutes an intensification. Art foregrounds the point of non-signification and non-discursivity, which aesthetic experience enables us to rework rather than abandon to infantilizing and homogenizing models.⁶¹ Guattari is explicit on this point:

There mustn't be any misunderstanding: I'm not proposing an aestheticization of the social. I only refer to art as a paradigm that underlines three types of problem: that of processual creativity, of the permanent calling into question of the identity of the object; that of the polyphony of enunciation; finally, that of autopoiesis, that is to say, the production of nuclei [foyers] of partial subjectification.⁶²

Aesthetics has always occupied a central place in Guattari's theoretical practice. On the one hand, it is evident in the poetic dimension of his writing, which seeks to avoid verticalization and transcendence through parataxis, repetition, and montage.⁶³ On the other hand, transversality and conceptual production—hallmarks of philosophical practice—enable resonance between disciplines and the reworking of heterogeneous materials. From this perspective, several commentators have noted affinities between Guattari's thought and the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno, particularly regarding the emphasis on the antinomic character of art that resists full epistemic capture.⁶⁴ Within Guattari's framework, the production of new forms of sensible matter is not necessarily the ultimate goal, but it is unquestionably among the primary aims. This endeavor entails the creation of new lines of flight, described by Guattari as "dives into chaos," followed by the task of bringing these heterogeneous elements back and integrating them into one's existential territories.⁶⁵

Dall'immaginario all'acustinario. Prolegomeni a un'ecosofia sonora (Teramo: Galaad, 2020); Marco Mancuso, *Chimera. Il corpo espanso per una nuova ecosofia dell'arte* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2023). For further information on Guattari's relationship with modern/contemporary art, see Stephen Zepke, "Art as Abstract Machine. Guattari's Modernist Aesthetics," *Deleuze Studies* 6 (2012), 224-239; Stephen Zepke, "Memories of the Future: I and Contemporary Art," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 16 (2022), 600-622. These notes were directed against Maurizio Lazzarato, "The Aesthetics Paradigm," Eng. trans. David Quigley, in *Deleuze, Guattari and the Production of the New*, ed. Simon O' Sullivan, and Stephen Zepke (London: continuum, 2008), 173-83.

61 Guattari, "Félix Guattari et l'art contemporain," 12; réed. *QQÉ*, 162-163; Eng. trans., 47-48.

62 Guattari, "Vertige de l'immanence," 19; réed. *QQÉ*, 311; Eng. trans., 30.

63 See Nadaud, "Félix Guattari l'écosophe," 18-23; Christiane Voss, "Schizoanalyse und Ecosophie (Félix Guattari)," in *Schlüsselwerke der Medienwissenschaft*, hrsg. Ivo Ritzer (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2020), 103.

64 Voss, "Schizoanalyse und Ecosophie," 103.

65 On the subject of dissensus, see Guattari, "Pratiques écosophiques...," 33; Eng. trans., 98; Guattari, "Qu'est-ce que l'écosophie?," 23a-b; réed., *QQÉ*, 76; Guattari, "Vers une autopoïétique de la communication," 52; réed. *QQÉ*, 148; Guattari, "Les modes de production de subjectivité" (1990), in *qqÉ*, 281; Guattari, "[Subjectivité machinique plutôt que transcendence]," in *QQÉ*, 329 note 1, 334, and 340; Guattari, "La forme d'organisation comme reflet du social," in *QQÉ*: 402; Guattari, "Écologie et mouvement ouvrier" (1992), *Chimères* 21 (1994), 98; réed. "Écologie et mouvement ouvrier. [Vers une recomposition écosophique]," in *QQÉ*: 410; Guattari, "Pour une éthique des médias," in *qqÉ*: 433; Félix Guattari, "Pour une refondation des pratiques sociales. Faillite des médias, crise de civilisations, fuite de la modernité [Vers une nouvelle alliance machinique]," in *qqÉ*: 496, and 508; Guattari, "La grand-peur écologique" (1989), in *qqÉ*: 517; Guattari, "Praxis éco," interview par Sylvie Constantinou, *Fil vert* (1991); réed. *QQÉ*: 554-557, and 561; Guattari, "Pavane pour un PSU défunt et des Verts mort-nés" (1986), in *QQÉ*: 570. For an analysis of the aesthetics of the process in Deleuze and Guattari, which emphasises the meaningless and disfiguring nature of writing and recording processes, see Stephan Hesper, *Schreiben ohne Text. Die prozessuale Ästhetik von Gilles Deleuze*

In schematic form, Guattari's aesthetic orientation may be summarized as follows:

1. the aesthetic grounding of thought and being within immanence;
2. an emphasis on processes of subjectivation involving human and non-human singularities alike (works of art, films, music, cities, technologies);
3. a focus on creative and transformative processes of production, paradigmatically observable in the arts (e.g., the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of semiotics and entities);
4. the differential integration of significant and insignificant elements in heterogeneous material configurations.⁶⁶

It follows that the aesthetic does not compensate for the political; rather, it is constitutive of it. In this sense, Guattari's position converges with recent lines of inquiry that, beginning from everyday aesthetic experience, have sought to articulate a more nuanced account of sensation within urban phenomena. Contemporary urban aesthetics⁶⁷—within which Guattari emerges as a key interlocutor—are concerned less with the formal qualities of the built environment than with the sensations that shape urban experience. In this respect, they recall the pioneering analyses of Georg Simmel on the intensification of nervous life in metropolitan contexts.⁶⁸

Accordingly, Guattari's reflections on architecture are consistently mediated by the concept of the machine. Buildings are conceived as capable of generating new affects within the milieus they inhabit.⁶⁹ Without absolutizing their role in the constitution of the city, Guattari nonetheless stresses the ethical, aesthetic, and political responsibility of architects, and the extent to which their practice can transform environmental and social relations.

und Félix Guattari (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994).

66 Voss, "Schizoanalyse und Ecosophie," 111.

67 For a critical reconstruction of the debate, see Andrea Borsari, "On Urban Aesthetics," *Iride* 2-3 (2024), 326-45.

68 The reference is mainly to the essay by Georg Simmel, "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben," *Jahrbuch der gehe-Stiftung Dresden* 9 (1903), 185-206; Eng. trans. Edward A. Shils, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324-339. In general, on this topic, see *Georg Simmel et le champ architectural. Sociabilité urbaine, paysage et esthétisation du monde*, dir. Manola Antonioli et Andrea Borsari (Milan: Mimésis, 2020). Guattari's work does not appear to demonstrate any explicit influence from Simmel; however, a notable convergence of ideas can be observed between the French and German philosophers concerning the concept of nervous stimulation. This alignment is exemplified by Guattari's reference to the studies conducted by Viktor von Weizsäcker on pathetic vitality. See Peter Pál Pelbart, "The Deterritorialized Unconscious," in *The Guattari Effect*, 68-83.

69 On architecture in Deleuze and Guattari, see James Williams, "Deleuze Ontology and Creativity. Becoming Architect," *Pli* 9 (2000), 200-19; Marko Jobst, "Gilles Deleuze and the Missing Architecture," *Deleuze Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014), 157-72; Marko Jobst, "Writing Sensation. Deleuze, Literature, Architecture and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*," *The Journal of Architecture* 21 (2016), 55-67; *Architectural and Urban Reflections after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Boundas, and Tentokali; Chris L. Smith, *Architecture After Deleuze and Guattari* (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2024). See also Manola Antonioli, "Deleuze, Guattari e l'architettura," *Iride* 51, no. 2 (2007), 319-27, which emphasizes how architecture, understood as a minor art and science, ranks first among the arts because it is linked to οἶκος, thus assuming a paradigmatic role for ecosophy.

As he writes:

This interaction between individual creativity and the multiplicity of material and social constraints, however, places a sanction on truth: there exists, in effect, a crossing of a threshold by means of which the architectural object and the urbanistic object acquire their own consistency as subjective enunciators: choose life or remain dead! The complexity of the position of the architect and urbanist is extreme, but fascinating when their aesthetic, ethical and political responsibilities are taken into account. Immersed in the consensus of the democratic City, it is up to them to pilot by their design [*dessin*] and their intention [*dessein*], the definitive bifurcations determining the fate of the subjective City. Either humanity, with the help of the architect and urbanist, will reinvent its urban future, or it will be condemned to perish under the weight of its own immobilization, that today threatens to render it helpless in facing the extraordinary challenges with which history confronts it.⁷⁰

Alongside his dialogue with architects such as Shin Takamatsu and his sustained interest in Japanese urban culture,⁷¹ Guattari consistently frames architectural practice in terms of responsibility and of the creation of a new architectural machine conceived as polyphonic and multilayered, involving the entirety of urban life.⁷²

From the standpoint of ecosophy, however, Stephen Luis Vilaseca's reading of Guattari's relation to urban cultural studies proves misleading. Vilaseca cites Frank Owen Gehry as a paradigmatic example of ecosophical architecture, emphasizing the meticulous calculation of errors and deviations in his studio's design process in order to reduce risk and cost while enabling formal experimentation.⁷³ Yet this example remains tied to an economy of waste reduction—that is, to the managerial optimization of waste within a cost-benefit logic—rather than to any engagement with the heterogeneous social stratifications that traverse urban space.

Ecosophy, by contrast, adopts a counterintuitive and paradoxical relation to waste. Rather than prioritizing quantitative reduction, it asks what practices can emerge *from* waste itself. Such practices arise unexpectedly, in interstitial spaces and times, and are generated by subjectivities that escape prediction. In this sense, ecosophical practices are intrinsically wasteful, and ecosophy entails a becoming-waste of practices. At the urban level, ecosophy therefore concerns itself with what Guattari calls "urban war machines."

70 Guattari, "Pratiques écosophiques...", 57; Eng. trans. 114-115.

71 See Guattari, *Machinic Eros*.

72 See Félix Guattari, "L'Énonciation architecturale," in *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1989), 291-301; Eng. trans. Andrew Goffey, "Architectural enunciation," in *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2013), 231-239, and 282-283.

73 See Stephen Luis Vilaseca, "Félix Guattari and urban cultural studies," *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), 137-144.

As Manola Antonioli explains,⁷⁴ Guattari envisages urban renewal as a collective process that radically transforms participation in design. Beyond architects, planners, and politicians, this process must involve social scientists and, crucially, residents and users themselves. Such an expanded field of participation fosters research and social experimentation aimed at anticipating not only spatial transformations, but also new forms of life. Neighborhood practices, education, culture, sports, transport, childcare, and elder care thus become integral components of urban recomposition. Guattari is fully aware that such participatory processes generate tensions, ambivalences, and conflicts—particularly when the category of “inhabitant” exceeds juridical definitions of citizenship. Nevertheless, this engagement is indispensable if a more active and collective appropriation of the urban megamachine is to occur.⁷⁵

In conclusion, Guattari’s ecosophy—grounded in the transversality of environment, social relations, and subjectivity—assigns a central place to urban phenomena. Cities function as megamachines that stratify and segment spaces and flows while continuously reshaping singularities. Within this framework, politics is inseparable from the new aesthetic paradigm, which seeks to cultivate new forms of subjectivity through media practices, architectural experimentation, and everyday invention. Urban ecosophy thus operates within smooth spaces that cut across rigid boundaries. The chaosmosis we inhabit calls upon us, despite the vertigo of the abyss, to affirm the emergence of the new in everyday life before it is re-encoded. As schizoanalysis cautions: “Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us.”⁷⁶

74 See Manola Antonioli, “Introduction,” in *Machines de guerre urbaines*, dir. Manola Antonioli (Paris: Loco, 2015), 13-20; Eng. trans. Stephanie Daneels, “Urban War Machines,” in *The Dark Precursor: Deleuze and Artistic Research*, vol. II, *The Dark Precursor in Image, Space, and Politics*, ed. Paulo de Assis, and Paolo Giudici (Leuven: Leuven UP, 2018), 431-6.

75 On this broad topic, see at least Joëlle Zask, *Participer. Essai sur les formes démocratiques de la participation* (Paris: Le Bord de l’eau, 2011).

76 Deleuze, and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, 625; Eng. trans., 500.

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'écosophie?* 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).

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MAIN SECTION

How do we build the future on the past? Public spaces as solid forms filled with new content

Aneta Jasná — University of Pardubice, Centre for Ethics
Contact: aneta.jasna@upce.cz

ABSTRACT

This article examines statues and monuments in public space as materialized narratives that shape collective memory, political values, and social inclusion. Drawing on theories by Ann Rigney, Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Sandra Shapshay, Sharon Zukin, and others, it argues that monuments do not merely represent the past but actively structure the present by naturalizing selective, often exclusionary histories. Their durability, scale, and placement produce emotional responses of awe and humility that can reinforce domination while rendering alternative memories invisible. Recent waves of statue toppling, particularly following the Black Lives Matter protests, are analyzed not as acts of erasure but as moments of visibility that expose the instability of monumental meaning. The article conceptualizes toppling as a collective, spatial practice through which marginalized voices contest inherited narratives embedded in the built environment. Through case studies ranging from Krzysztof Wodiczko's performative public artworks, Antony Gormley's Fourth Plinth project, to the grassroots "Buddha of Oakland," the paper explores alternative forms of monumentality grounded in temporality, participation, and care. It concludes that public spaces should be understood not as fixed containers of memory but as solid forms filled with changing content. Monuments, therefore, are best approached as provisional instruments within negotiation over values, belonging, and the possibility of collective change.

KEYWORDS

Public space; Monuments and statues; Collective memory; Monumentality; Social change.

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Why do monuments matter?

The question of monuments has been examined from many angles, which has ignited ongoing debates concerning the aesthetic, political, or historical implications of representing the past. Monuments became a lens through which individuals examine the representation of the past (Siobhan Kattago), collective memory (Halbwachs), the cult of the dead (Reinhart Koselleck), the question of visibility and invisibility (Robert Musil), or the discrepancy between memory and history (Pierre Nora). This discussion also involves dividing sculptural art into groups such as statues, monuments, and memorials. For the sake of my argument, I will not research the branch that includes memorials as “sites of death, places attached to a certain event.”¹ On the contrary, my observation focuses on statues and monuments erected within public spaces, predominantly squares or centers of parks—the most noticeable places in the town, to serve their stated purpose of being visible to people who pass by.

I use the terms “statues” and “monuments” interchangeably in this paper. A statue has its own, more or less closed logic that intersects with the logic of monuments. They are often celebratory depictions of the past and are closely tied to a particular place. Due to their representative function, statues and monuments are mostly figurative and placed on pillars, which are an inseparable part of the art.² Plinths are integral to statues, as they underscore their monumentality and significance. “Public artworks placed high above the ground provide opportunities only for contemplation, whereas those at ground level are more likely to triangulate social interactions.”³ In that sense, monuments and statues do not refer only to themselves, but they are part of a broader context.

In the first part of the article, I ask why some monuments and statues evoke such anger and desire for destruction. To do so, we must ask what they represent. Ann Rigney, in her article “Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change” (2022), claims that “monuments are materialisations of larger narratives that operate within a broader culture of memory.”⁴ In that sense, monuments “never stand alone.”⁵ They embody certain values; therefore, with their removal, people struggle with what they represent rather than with the object itself. This conflict of dynamics is a “resource for effecting change,”⁶ in which marginalized groups raise

1 Reinhart Koselleck, *War Memorials: Identity Formations of the Survivors* (1999), trans. Todd Presner, in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, (Stanford: sup, 2002), 320.

2 Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (1979): 33.

3 Quentin Stevens, “Designing for Difficulty, Agonistic Urban Design,” in *Public Space Design and Social Cohesion*, ed. Patricia Aelbrecht and Quentin Stevens (New York: Routledge, 2019), 267.

4 Ann Rigney, “Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change,” *Studies on National Movements* 9 (2022): 7.

5 *ibid.*, 14.

6 *ibid.*, 11.

their voices to be represented in the narrative created by the built environment. "They not only give symbolic expression to the values with which the depicted figures are associated, their very physical presence is itself a way of imposing those values on society while claiming to speak on behalf of the community at large."⁷ The material presence of statues highlights the intangible. Statues materialize the absence of someone, usually the monarch, the chieftain, the poet, etc. In this way, they pass on values to the present. As Rosalyn Deutsche frames it, they embodied an image of a "glorious past."⁸

In the face of turbulent societal change, how can we build on or maintain current values while preserving past ones? As Gary Younge writes, clashes over statues express more than aesthetic differences: "[...] the issue was never confined to the statue itself. It was always about what the statue represented: the prevailing and persistent issues that remained, and the legacy of whatever the statue was erected to symbolise."⁹

Similarly, Erika Naginski emphasizes the role of an allegory that statues and monuments generate. According to this historian of architecture, allegory is an "ability to create a significant link between ideas and things."¹⁰ The more people are exposed to a particular image, the more they become familiar not only with a thing itself but with its meaning.¹¹ In that sense, the statue becomes a bearer of embodied ideas.¹² The central point of Naginski's argument is that statues do not represent a real person but are an allegory of a new social order.¹³

According to Sandra Shapshay, monuments are created with a particular awareness of the adoration and celebration of certain political or religious acts undertaken by individuals. They elicit strong emotions and sustain memory and discourse. "The purpose of any work of art (*schöne Kunst*), for Kant (as well as for Danto), is to embody ideas, particularly for Kant, moral ideas, and to spark a free play with these ideas."¹⁴ I argue that one does not devote sufficient effort to deliberating on the political and moral impacts of monuments when discussing the role of art in public spaces. Shapshay aptly points out that this impact received almost no attention from aestheticians, and she aims to establish a category called monu

7 *ibid.*, 17.

8 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: mit, 1996), 5.

9 Gary Younge, "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down," *The Guardian*, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jun/01/gary-younge-why-every-single-statue-should-come-down-rhodes-colston>.

10 Erika Naginski, "The Public Image of Demos," in *Ethics of the Urban: The City and Spaces of Political*, ed. Mohsen Mostafavi (Zurich: Müller, 2017), 87.

11 *ibid.*, 88.

12 *ibid.*, 100.

13 *ibid.*, 101.

14 Sandra Shapshay, "What Is the Monumental?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79, no. 2 (2021): 151.

mental, in which the aesthetic and political influences appear as an intertwined phenomenon. She defines the “monumental” as follows:

“monument—that is, a work of public, commemorative art—succeeds in being monumental (or eliciting a ‘monumental response’ in a spectator) when that spectator: *feels* a combination of awe (feeling small and humbled in the presence of something great) and ennoblement (by feeling in some way connected/unified with that great thing or what it represents), and *reflects* at least in part *favorably* upon the intended moral and political lesson embodied in the public, commemorative art.”¹⁵

Shapshay, like Rigney, expects statues and monuments to engage with the emotions of their inhabitants. Both await a response from the audience. As Rigney states with respect to monuments: “In their very materiality, they are designed to edify, generate awe, display power, inspire enthusiasm or, as in the case of more recent memorials, quiet reflection.”¹⁶ In that sense, the question is not merely a matter of aesthetic taste and appreciation, but also whether it is appropriate to feel certain emotions while using public spaces. Sharon Zukin highlights the unique role of public spaces when she writes that “public spaces construct broad social identities. These refer to people’s ability to think of themselves as city dwellers, citizens of a nation-state, and free human beings.”¹⁷ I argue that statues and monuments occupy a specific position within the category of indirect forms of discrimination. The indirect means that no signs would prevent a particular group of people from using the public space where the statue is located. Still, they embody values that can be read as reproducing spatial inequality and exclusion.

In his essay *On The Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874), Friedrich Nietzsche reflects on the term “monumental,” not solely with respect to specific statues but more broadly with respect to a monumental perception of history. For him, monumental history is how we perceive the past. We build our present and future upon the foundation of the past. Like a tree, Nietzsche writes, humans have roots that connect them deeply with their history:

“The feeling of the tree that clings to its roots, the happiness of knowing one’s growth to be not merely arbitrary and fortuitous, but the inheritance, the fruit and blossom of a past, that does not merely justify but crown the present.”¹⁸

15 *ibid.*, 155.

16 Rigney, “Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change,” 18.

17 Sharon Zukin, “Reimagining Civil Society: Conflict and Control in the City’s Public Spaces,” in *Public Space: Between Reimagination and Occupation*, ed. Mariusz Czepczynski and Svetlana Hristova (New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.

18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874), trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington: Richer, 2010), 15.

Our interconnectedness with the past means that we are growing from the past into the present, and this also provides us with the knowledge that what was possible before may recur. As Nietzsche argues:

“Now, what purpose is served for contemporary man by the monumental consideration of the past, busying ourselves with the classics and rarities of earlier times? He derives from the fact that the greatness which was once there at all events once was possible and therefore will really be possible once again.”¹⁹

Nietzsche criticizes monumental history for its capacity to produce false narratives through selective favoritism toward great events and individuals. Moreover, monumental history fosters the hope that great history may recur. Nietzsche argues for the limitation of monumental history because it cannot have “complete truth.”²⁰ Not only do we deal here with a task of shattered truth, but it may feel “as if someone else’s memory had to come to be your own,” adds Dan Hicks in the prologue to his book *Every Monument Will Fall: A Story of Remembering and Forgetting* (2025).²¹ Can an inanimate object beguile us? asks Hicks, highlighting a connection among history, memory, and art in public spaces. In light of statues and monuments, I wonder whether we, through public spaces, remember history or rather someone else’s memory:

“Just as a statue can serve to mix up the person depicted with their transubstantiated likeness carved in stone or wrought in bronze, so it’s possible to mistake your own life story and values for those of a tacit inherited subculture hard-wired into the arts, culture, heritage and education sectors since the mid-nineteenth century.”²²

To connect Hicks’s thoughts on memory and Nietzsche’s critique of monumental history with the role of monuments in public spaces, one can see the conflation of the individual with the general good. To rip out and glorify only certain personalities from our history, we are running a risk in which we may mistake individual motivations for the general good.

Similar to Nietzsche and Hicks, Younge claims that history can become distorted in the shadow of monuments. We may even envision monuments as public representations of a particular time. Moreover, statues and monuments can easily be mistaken for tradition and history. Younge wrote his article “Why every single statue should come down” at the height of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2021, in the spirit of the moment, arguing that not only should controversial statues be removed, but that every human or figurative statue should be toppled:

19 *ibid.*, 10

20 *ibid.*, 11.

21 Dan Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall: A Story of Remembering and Forgetting* (London: Hutchinson, 2025), 1.

22 *ibid.*, 28.

The problem isn't that we have too few statues, but too many. I think it is a good thing that so many of these statues of pillagers, plunderers, bigots and thieves have been taken down. I think they are offensive. But I don't think they should be taken down because they are offensive. I think they should be taken down because I think all statues should be taken down.²³

Younge frames the placement of statues and monuments in public spaces as arrogant because they are built with eternity in mind and thereby limit societal change.²⁴ The narrative's inequity and selectivity, as represented in statues, are linked to the possible creation of a cult centered on a single person. The space of appearance in the public realm is always more complex than statues may symbolize. Sculpted individuals are only the tip of the iceberg in the complex chain of history from which they are torn out and placed onto a pedestal of the past.

As described above, statues constitute a form of symbolic appropriation of public space. They selectively represent certain aspects of the past while ignoring or downplaying others. For Zukin, "these symbols repress memories of some eras while selectively reinforcing others."²⁵ Influenced by Nietzsche, Younge and Shapshay's critical category of monumental history, we can better understand the role of public art and the complex moral views embedded in the monuments and statues that surround us.

The answer to the initial question of what statues and monuments represent is that they carry very strong emotions of awe or humility. They also offer a false or at least fragmented picture of the past from which an incomplete narrative stems. Statues are erected to maintain power discourse, not to spark power relations, but to maintain domination. Moreover, they may exclude people from the common world and public appearances and prevent them from dwelling with others. Given the exclusive nature of statues, I examine the collective act or action of toppling during protests in public space in the second part of this paper. I also address our capacity for new beginnings and change through the built environment. More importantly, I examine the public realm in terms of its temporality; accordingly, I argue that the built environment is not an end in itself but a means. Although statues and monuments are erected with eternity in mind, their essence depends on the fluidity of the memories and meanings we ascribe to them at a given moment; they are "never stable."²⁶

23 Younge, "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down."

24 *ibid.*

25 Zukin, "Reimagining Civil Society," 26.

26 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 30.

The change

I begin this section with a counterargument to what was written. In the previous section, I described statues and monuments as representative of a particular narrative and as visible elements of the built environment. In contrast, Musil writes:

[M]onuments are so conspicuously inconspicuous. There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen—indeed to attract attention. But you never look at them, and do not generally have the slightest notion of whom they are supposed to represent, except that maybe you know if it's a man or a woman.²⁷

The toppling of statues and monuments sheds light on what they represent and the context in which they were built. The act of toppling also makes the statues visible, even to those who have lived next door to them for the past forty years. And precisely this moment of noticing, of memory's resurrection and its giving meaning, is the essential part of monumental history. "It's about how what was unnoticed and tacit can become visible, I was saying, about an institutional culture that's failed to keep up with the reality outside."²⁸ Within the broader context of political and social change, a question arises regarding another layer of this discussion. When we examine more closely why only certain monuments are visible and spark public interest, we can also ask: why now? Hence, why are some monuments visible in the public space?

This question was central to Koselleck's research on war memorials and the semantics of historical time. Our sensibility towards the built environment is fluid and constantly shifting over time; for that reason, I see Musil's claim as only partially true:

"The connection between a demand for meaning in political and social terms and its visual expression is established by the formal language of memorials that are supposed to reach the sensibility of observers. Both the forms and the sensibility are subject to historical transformation, but they apparently change along different temporal rhythms."²⁹

I perceive the removal of statues as a litmus test of change in the lived environment through the built environment. The value of a certain thing (in that case, a statue) appears as an exchange between members of society. This became omnipresent after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, especially in the United States. More than a hundred statues and monuments were torn down in that year as a result of a fight to end systematic racial injustice that was, among others, distributed and maintained spatially. It was not only the call for a different built environment but also for a new

27 Robert Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (1936), trans. Peter Wortsman (London: Archipelago, 2006), 64–65.

28 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 26.

29 Koselleck, "War Memorials," 320.

way of living together. As Kattago puts it, "One of the first signs of regime change is the tearing down of statues and monuments. This symbolic break with the old regime and beginning of a new one leads to a myriad of other questions."³⁰ But the fall or tear is only one second in the whole process of falling. The fall is the visible, but this article reacts mostly to the invisible, to the process and its layers, its context, to seek a deeper understanding of that moment, in which all of it becomes materialized: "A fall, any fall, will always be just the most visible moment in the unfolding of some wider, deeper, more longstanding process of descent or failure."³¹ There is something particular about human-shaped statues and monuments when they are torn down: the crowd treats them as human. Indeed, they are very often tied up and decapitated. I see this as an act in which the crowd acquires ownership of public spaces, not only in its spatial dispositions but also in the intangible sense—questioning the memory itself. The act of toppling does not provide answers or solutions but poses questions that initiate a new dialogue, previously absent. Additionally, it not only influences communities but also reshapes how we think about public spaces and their meanings. The toppling of statues often takes place as a result of collective action and protest. As Zukin writes, protests occur in public spaces and can also change how we perceive those spaces:

"Though central places have no monopoly as a site of protest demonstrations, they carry a significant moral weight in the history of the nation, [...] they also command widespread attention. For both reasons, collective actions in these spaces have a strong potential to shape public opinion."³²

In a similar vein, Krzysztof Wodiczko argues for the importance of rights in public space. Without accommodating all voices, the democratic assumption of public space ceased to hold. "The democratic process depends on the vitality of public space. Public space is the space of rights."³³ Such as two lithospheric plates, the durability of a built environment and understandings of the past represented by people colliding together in public spaces. What equalizes us in that earthquake situation is the possibility to participate in a political narrative. However, there is a difference between being represented (e.g., someone speaking on one's behalf) and creating the conditions for being able to speak for oneself. I argue that being part of the environment, which is occupied by statues that represent a person connected with non-belonging and exclusive ideals, steals the voice from those who are marginalized or traumatized and puts them aside from the public. Hicks describes the language of statues and monuments as "the

30 Siobhan Kattago, "Written in Stone: Monuments and Representation," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 180.

31 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 26.

32 Zukin, "Reimagining Civil Society," 17.

33 Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Art, Trauma and Parrhesia," in *Ethics of the Urban*, 126.

kind of voice where every mention of a name is a tool for silencing someone else.”³⁴ However, the art in public spaces can reverse that situation. As Wodiczko states, artists should equip people with the tools necessary for communication rather than speak on their behalf. “Media art and performative public art can play a role in recovering or unfreezing the capacity to speak by creating a situation in which marginalized or traumatized people might insert their experience into public discourse.”³⁵

There are different ways to remember. Ones that do not lean towards eternity yet still offer an intended lesson. Wodiczko’s work is primarily video art, in which he presents stories of homeless people, performed and told on camera. He then screens those videos in a continuous loop, making them a vital part of public spaces. By using a visual and audio loop of people telling stories, he undermines the durability of statues. He enters the public realm with a temporary message that highlights the lives of people who are usually rendered invisible or banished from public life. His approach creates the conditions for being heard and for giving voice to the silenced, not by placing their names on plinths or pillars, but by offering tools for inclusion. Only then might public spaces become a part of the “healing environment for free and open speaking.”³⁶ Further on, Wodiczko is asking about the equal conditions for our speech. “Who is able to tell the truth? What are the consequences of telling the truth? What are its anticipated positive effects for the city, for the city’s rulers, for the individual, etc.?”³⁷ He reframes the role of artists as those who empower people as opposed to sculpture as a mere celebration of power. Although he uses different techniques than a sculptor, I still see his work as fitting into the category of the monumental as understood by Rosalind Krauss, who argues that the new becomes more acceptable when we can associate it with forms we already know that have grown from the past, and that might develop into the future.³⁸ Wodiczko’s digital statues and holograms did not lose their monumental dimension; instead, they were used differently.

His attitude towards public art underscores the question crucial to Shapshay’s category of the monumental and Nietzsche’s term monumental history—namely, what stories are worthy of being told? Secondly, his public art dives deeper into how we tell stories. In his projects, Wodiczko sheds light on public taboos such as illegal detention, imprisonment, domestic violence, work-related abuse, mental well-being, family issues, etc. These experiences are part of everyday life yet often hidden from the public realm. However, their message is conveyed temporarily because his statues are not permanent. They are not erected with eternity in mind;

34 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 35.

35 Wodiczko, “Art, Trauma and Parrhesia,” 126.

36 *ibid.*, 134.

37 *ibid.*, 134-135.

38 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 30.

on the contrary, they tend to be a flickering reflection of the personal past. Nonetheless, Wodiczko tends to arouse strong emotions and promote values of inclusion. In that sense, his artistic attitude leans toward the “ville” rather than the “cite”, toward a space of appearance rather than a public realm.

Another approach that moves towards eternity and attempts to reshape our sense of monumentality has been articulated in Antony Gormley's Fourth Plinth project in Trafalgar Square, titled *One & Other* (2009).

There has been ongoing discussion about what to add to the empty fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. Younge summarized its history as follows:

The story starts in the mid-19th century, when the designers of Trafalgar Square decided that there would be one huge column for Horatio Nelson and four smaller plinths for statues surrounding it. They managed to put statues on three of the plinths before running out of money, leaving the fourth one bare.³⁹

Younge, who was Chair of the Committee formed to devise a solution for the empty plinth, outlined several proposed ideas. “Over the years there have been requests to put David Beckham, Bill Morris, Mary Seacole, Benny Hill and Paul Gascoigne up there.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, the committee decided to leave the plinth as an empty pedestal for various rotating art projects. The best known was the one formed by Antony Gormley, in which he selected two thousand four hundred real people, each of whom could spend sixty minutes on that empty fourth plinth. In total, Gormley received almost 35,000 applications, of which he randomly chose 2,400. Within this performance, Gormley raised several questions: “Who can be represented in art? How can we make it? How can we experience it?”⁴¹ In addition, he argued that an open space provides individuals with the “possibility to test their sense of self and how they might communicate this to a wider world.”⁴²

Following the proposed cases, changing public space is a means of participating in the built environment and, therefore, demands the city's openness. Such openness can be manifested as direct intervention towards the built space, for example, destruction, as in the case of tearing down the statues. However, openness can also mean starting something new. In the cases stated above, the discussion was scaffolded around the intangible, within stories, participation in the narrative, and being visible in public spaces. Therefore, in my last example, I will unpack the example known as the ‘Buddha of Oakland,’ in which a statue was placed to promote specific values and to protect its neighborhood.

39 Younge, “Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down.”

40 *ibid.*

41 Antony Gormley, “One & Other,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20090301085436/http://www.oneandother.co.uk/>.

42 *ibid.*

In a fifteen-issue ('He is Neutral,' 2015) of an American podcast series, *This is Criminal*, the reporter invited Dan Stevenson, who has lived in Oakland's Eastlake neighborhood for forty years. Eastlake was a part of town known for high crime, an experience that also shaped Stevenson's life. Once, he found an unarmed man on his balcony; however, the police did not do anything. Likewise, they did not help Stevenson solve his biggest problem—the giant pile of garbage that people used to pile up next to his house. For many, leaving garbage on the corner of 11th Avenue and 19th Street had become a habit. As Stevenson recounted on the Podcast: "Mattresses, tables, just junk, just continual junk, a lot of graffiti, a lot of urination and drug use kind of thing."

Since the police were inactive, Stevenson decided to act independently to prevent people from creating a dump next to his door. He developed a unique solution by placing a statue of the Buddha at the site where people previously discarded waste. The statue was not a colossal piece of concrete; it was only a half-meter, relatively inconspicuous sitting Buddha. When a reporter asked Stevenson why he chose Buddha, he said it was because "he is neutral."

Stevenson did not seek permission from any authority to place the statue. "It is best not to ask; you just do it and see what is happening." Since 2009, the year he put a Buddha statue in his neighborhood, people have left small gifts, such as oranges and coins, there. As an unpredictable consequence of Stevenson's act, the statue of Buddha reconnected Oakland's Vietnamese community. Over time, community members built a small house around the Buddha for prayer and worship, even when it rained. More importantly, for Stevenson, the statue helped reduce the neighborhood's crime rate by 85%. Drug dealing ended, and there were no long piles of garbage in front of his door.

A year after the initial radio interview, Stevenson was invited back to report on the current state of his neighborhood. In hindsight, he said that "Buddha brings tranquility and peace to the neighborhood. He even has a Google map point." In this new episode of *This is Criminal*, Stevenson presented a broader picture of the Buddha's impact on the Oakland community. He highlighted the statue's positive reception: "In a world where we hear the bad parts only, the positive becomes visible. It inspires people to do better things." In a broader sense, Stevenson diminished the importance of so-called hostile architecture as a mechanism for preventing crime and maintaining order, including benches with spikes and, as I argue in this paper, statues. Instead, he saw his approach to crime as more effective because it changed people's attitudes in society. He did not intend to banish people from certain places as a soothing solution but instead offered common ground. Creation, as the act of initiating something new, is not about limitation as a final solution, but rather a lengthy process of

exploring possibilities for change. Although the city's form is well planned, its content, as argued at the beginning of this article, remains fluid.

David Harvey maintains that "the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire."⁴³ In other words, the city's atmosphere is intrinsically linked to the mood of its people. Suppose we continue to be surrounded by hostile architecture and/or statues and monuments celebrating ultimate power and injustice as our common ground. In that case, there is a risk that we remain an imprint of it, which prevents us from creating places to dwell: "Crime prevention through environmental design (cpted) is focused on keeping away bad influences and bad people."⁴⁴ However, Quentin Stevens maintains that being part of public spaces "also helps people to develop empathy and can lead to cooperation and solidarity."⁴⁵

The toppling of monuments serves as a platform for our disagreement with the values that statues and monuments embody. As tempting as this might be, Rigney considers overthrowing their durability. Monuments were built to last; however, their destruction might prove otherwise: "It may appear to represent a fixed moment in time, but that is part of the illusion produced by monuments as a technology. The medium of monumentality is always duration."⁴⁶ Powerful moments of outmaneuvering eternity bring hope that the built environment and the values that statues represent may be changed. The moment of transformation that Michael Arad describes is a sudden connection within an anonymous crowd. Those who considered themselves strangers were suddenly unified.⁴⁷ Human beings are not meant to last forever, neither as living beings nor as beings set into stone. Yet, we (as human beings) are much more than statues can tell us. Because statues, as Younge adds, always tell us more about the values of the period in which they were erected than about the story of the person depicted: "As the evolution of public spaces is inevitable, their degree of inclusivity also evolves in time in relation with local and global contexts."⁴⁸

The question of change, however, cannot be solved only by removing or erecting them. The toppling of statues is not a direct pathway to equality or social transformation. Racism does not disappear the very minute that a statue falls, as described by Rigney in the example of the statue of Edvard Colston, the slave trader from the Royal African Company. "Yes, it is argued, Colston has been decommissioned and racism is no longer

43 David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53, (2008): 23.

44 Stevens, "Designing for Difficulty, Agonistic Urban Design," 268.

45 *ibid.*, 269.

46 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 31.

47 Michael Arad, "The Sacred, the Quotidian, and the World Trade Center Memorial," in *Ethics of the Urban*, 107.

48 Müge Akkar Ercan and Nihan Oya Memlük, "The Role of Public Spaces on Social Cohesion and Inclusivity: Metamorphosis of a Historic Park in Ankara, Turkey," in *Public Space*, 101.

publicly tolerated in the city's monuments; in that sense a corner has been turned. However, there is still inequality in housing and access to resources: so, what has really changed?"⁴⁹

Change is sometimes also mistaken for deletion by those who claim to be against toppling, but "removing statues does not erase our history."⁵⁰ In addition, Younge aptly points out that statues are not history; they are representatives of historical figures. In their toppling, we do not change history; we only transform our collective narrative:⁵¹

"Nobody thinks that when Iraqis removed statues of Saddam Hussein from around the country, they wanted him to be forgotten. Quite the opposite. They wanted him, and his crimes, to be remembered. They just didn't want him to be revered."⁵²

I state that monuments and statues attract attention because they are part of the public space. They gain different meanings if displayed in an exhibition or museum. "Displayed in this way, alongside some of the posters left by protesters, it has become a historical curiosity rather than an irritant in the public space."⁵³ Michel Foucault depicts museums and galleries as places of accumulated time, where time is locked and therefore perceived differently.⁵⁴ Deutsche considers museums and galleries as the opposite of public spaces in the context of art.⁵⁵ The difference between the perception of statues in museums and those in public spaces reveals the meanings we assign to public spaces.

Deutsche claims that public spaces denote relationships with others through which we structure our discourse.⁵⁶ She adds that the current fragmentation of public spaces, whether politically or economically, affects our perception of the common space, through which we create our place in public/political life and which fosters the sense that we are capable of change.⁵⁷ Public spaces must accommodate myriad individuals simultaneously. It is important to note that the toppling of the statues is not the result of consensus; it is part of a specific group's agenda. However, the same can be said about their erection. Therefore, there is no agreement on whether the toppling of statues should be regarded as

49 Rigney, "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change," 33.

50 Younge, "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down."

51 Rigney, "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change," 33.

52 Younge, "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down."

53 Rigney, "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change," 31.

54 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1967), ed. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 26.

55 Rosalyn Deutsche, "Umění a Veřejný Prostor. Otázky Demokracie," in *Stav Věcí – Sochy v Ulicích*, ed. Karel Císař (Brno: Dům umění města Brna, 2011), 163.

56 *ibid.*, 160.

57 *ibid.*, 168.

beneficial or futile; with that in mind, we can conclude that it has been a habitual part of our history. "It is not an attack on history, it is history itself."⁵⁸

To return to Nietzsche's metaphor of a tree, I agree with Wodiczko's claim that public spaces play a role in the process of healing. Hence, I consider toppling statues a collective healing process that does not deny or erase the roots from which we stem, only slightly shaping how our branches develop. As Musil writes with respect to statues: "It is easy for them to stand around quietly, accepting occasional glances; we have a right to ask more out of monuments today."⁵⁹ As he suggests, I argue that in the recent toppling of monuments, we can read much more than our history by asking where we are going rather than where we came from.

58 Rigney, "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change," 32.

59 Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, 67.

Aneta Jasná, Ph.D. is a philosopher affiliated with the Centre for Ethics at the University of Pardubice. Her research focuses on the philosophy of public space, feminist spatial theory, and urban ethics. She received her Ph.D. in philosophy in 2024 and was a Fulbright–Masaryk Visiting Researcher at the New School for Social Research in New York. Her work explores the relationship between the built and lived environment and the role of public space in contemporary democratic societies.

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MAIN SECTION

From the Public Square to the Democratic Square¹

¹ Translated from French to English with the assistance of AI (Claude, Anthropic); reviewed by Claudia Nigrelli and Francesco Di Maio

Joëlle Zask — Aix-Marseille Université
Contact: joelle.zask@univ-amu.fr

ABSTRACT

This article critiques the dominant model of the public square as a mineral, geometric, and nature-excluding space, arguing that it functions historically as a device of political control rather than as a genuinely democratic environment. Through a critical reading of emblematic squares from imperial, colonial, and totalitarian contexts, the text shows how the separation of politics from nature produces intertwined ecological and democratic failures. In contrast, the article reconstructs an alternative genealogy of the democratic square — rooted in ancient agoras, republican forums, and Mediterranean traditions — in which public space emerges as an ecologically embedded, socially plural, and action-oriented landscape. Integrating nature into public squares is thus presented not as an aesthetic or environmental add-on, but as a fundamental condition for democratic life.

KEYWORDS

Public Square; Political Space; Democracy; Urban Ecology; Participation.

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Why are our major public squares so mineral? Their ground surfaces are almost entirely covered with concrete or stone; vegetation is absent or, at best, pushed to the margins; trees are rare and, when present, placed in strict alignments or containers. Some will respond that squares belong to the domain of civilization rather than nature, that they are designed for large gatherings, or that their maintenance by municipal services requires vacant expanses to allow machinery to pass.² Yet this dichotomy between the political public square and nature raises fundamental problems for both democracy and ecology. Should the assembly of citizens take place outside the world? Could nature not serve as a useful partner in the process of bringing together different wills, opinions, or ways of life? Conversely, does the mineral square not exert a constraining and coercive power that stands in stark opposition to democratic ways of living? In this article, I aim to uncover the pitfalls of this divide and foreground the political stakes of redesigning our most meaningful public spaces — those in which we gather and act together — in favor of coupling culture and nature.

When we think of notable, “historic,” and “political” public squares — such as those toward which the “square movements” converged beginning in 2010, or those on which large demonstrations take place — we imagine a vast, open expanse of regular geometric form: a circle, rectangle, or interlocking triangles. Tahrir Square in Cairo, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma in Athens, Taksim in Istanbul, Maidan in Kyiv, but also Red Square and Tiananmen Square in Beijing, belong to this type. Place de la République, designed by Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann, was a parade ground whose spirit has been partly restored since its redevelopment. The same is true of Taksim Square in Istanbul, whose separation from Gezi Park — partially saved from destruction by popular movements that were brutally repressed — is now complete. In the middle of these largely vacant spaces, a monument or statue often stands, symbolizing a historical event, a national “identity,” or a religious, political (as in Place Georges V in Brussels), or economic power (as in Place Vendôme in Paris). The ground is flattened; a single glance can take in the entire space. Everything is “visible,” designed to be seen and to exhibit itself. Geometrically standardized, the square is also overwhelmingly mineral. It is a slab that separates its users from the earth.

Schematically, the traditional square evokes the ideal city depicted in the famous Renaissance panel known as the *Città ideale di Urbino*. It is an entirely frontal, symmetrical space, empty of people and life, except for a few flowerpots on windowsills and some pigeons. Set apart from the irrepressible fluctuations of wild life — human or otherwise — it represents a timeless, universal rational order, one of proportionality and constancy.

2 This article draws on elements previously published in “Écologie de la place publique démocratique,” *Les carnets du paysage*, no. 33 (2018), 89-99 as well as on material from my book (Lormont: Le Bord de l’Eau, 2018), republished as *Se réunir* (Paris: Premier Parallèle, 2022).

The utopia embodied there is also an *uchronia*. Organized according to a mathematical grid of converging lines leading to a single focal point — the perfectly circular doorway of the central temple — the ideal city depicted on the Urbino panel is not susceptible to transformation, either by its users or by historical or natural events. As Camillo Sitte demonstrated,³ the geometric organization of a square — whether laid out as a grid, with concentric circles, triangles, and so forth — can neither evolve nor be modified through use. It is therefore removed from historical becoming: it can neither integrate the past, which it erases through the *tabula rasa* of existing structures, nor change as users develop activities within it.

In theory as in practice, the square is therefore conceived as a construction separated from nature. Identified with the masculine, political realm, it is opposed to the feminine, private space represented by the public garden. The tradition according to which the city stands in opposition to nature — urban life against rural life — has become widely accepted, justifying a monistic and purist conception of political practices that continues to explain their democratic deficits. Several reasons are commonly offered. The first, age-old one holds that public squares were intended as sites in which the urban condition could embody and concentrate itself, expelling vegetation — or at least unpredictable vegetation — leveling the terrain, eliminating irregularities, and covering it uniformly. According to Lewis Mumford, the city was originally conceived as a fortress, a place of defense as well as a conquest of the surrounding environment. The square and natural phenomena therefore mutually exclude each other.⁴ In the face of conquest's demands, nature has no place. It undermines behavioral predictability; its manifestations contain an uncontrollable degree of risk; and they bring continual changes that contradict any utopia of eternal permanence. Wind, rain, and heat obstruct the smooth conduct of human affairs and interfere with their regulation.

A second reason why squares are separated from nature stems from the political and social functions we believe they should serve. They have been — and still are — conceived as spaces for the exercise and display of dominant power, including that of the people. In seeking to embody sovereignty, they exclude any foreign element, anything wild, and any risk of accident. If vegetation exists there, it must be strictly controlled.

Furthermore, — this is a third argument supporting the artificiality of the public square — we tend to consider political practices as, unlike most others, highly spiritual activities. Bertrand Lévy, for instance, explains that in a square citizens are not connected to manifestations of nature, but rather to the heart of culture, history, and urban memory.⁵

3 Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* (1889), trans. George R. Collins and Christiane Crasemann Collins (New York: Random House, 1965).

4 Lewis Mumford, *The City in History, Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 196.

5 Bertrand Lévy, "Urban Square as the Place of History, Memory, Identity," in *Memory of the City*,

Thanks to an appropriate design, the square would elevate us above our animality and enable us to transcend it.⁶ To live in a city is to detach oneself from the earth, to rise toward the sky, as if within a Babel tower rebuilt a thousand times. Here again, the natural environment — and the experience of alterity it brings — has no place.

Finally, the aforementioned goals of urbanization, power display, and spiritualization are all even more fully achieved when the square is configured as an entity frozen in time. With a few exceptions, we prefer to rely on a pure geometric form rather than adapt the square to its environment — for example, by following the terrain's slope, incorporating existing buildings, or preserving preexisting large trees. At best, the square is "greened," meaning artificially planted with external, often exotic species — harmful to local ecological balance — that have no relation to its history. Like many of our "landscaped" spaces, which contain the same species, the same flowerbeds planted in the same way, the same urban furniture, the same circulation patterns, the resulting square becomes reproducible and delocalized. Set apart from climatic hazards, unpredictable natural events, and geographical accidents, it reveals what in human existence is assumed to be constant. In short, the founding act of the square is a design phase: an initial stage of artificial, context-free, ground-detached conception, upon which the space and its movable elements are subsequently configured and situated.⁷

The separation between the square and nature has two perverse effects, which are like the two faces of the same coin. The first is ecological. In the age of global warming, the classical urban square becomes an aberration: excessive heat and glare, immediate evaporation of moisture, concentration of fine particulates, soil impermeabilization — with the soil beneath the slab degraded — risks of flooding, excessive runoff, and so on. In Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, the vast open space serving as the esplanade of the city hall is unusable for much of the year. Only the areas at the far end of this immense square, recently planted with trees and equipped with seating and a shallow pool, can be incorporated into the daily life of nearby residents. It is well known that trees cool cities and regenerate soils. Moreover, squares exposed to the elements — rain, wind, sun — also expose the people and activities situated there. Beyond being uncomfortable and harmful to the urban ecosystem, they reveal our responsibility for the degradation of the climate. Their mineral character and emptiness result from the same desire for control and domination over human behavior that has led to extractivism and the unlimited exploitation of a

ed. Dusica Drazic, Slavica Radisic and Marijana Simu (Belgrade: Kulturklammer, 2012), 156-173; see also Id., "La place urbaine en Europe comme lieu idéal," in *Lieux d'Europe: Mythes et limites*, ed. Stella Gervas and François Rosset (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2008), 65-85.

6 This is the case, for example, in Hannah Arendt's reading of Aristotle in *The Human Condition* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

7 On the concept of design, see in particular Herbert Alexander Simon, "The Science of Design: Creating the Artificial," *Design Issues* 4, no. 1-2 (1988), 67-82.

subjugated nature. The taming — or even eradication — of nature testifies to a political project of artificially and voluntaristically producing forms of social life. The ecological and socio-political failings of the classical square go hand in hand.

The social constraints imposed by the typomorphological choices that follow from our classical conception of the square are therefore clearly public, but just as clearly anti-democratic. The public square is not a democratic square — at least not necessarily. In fact, the characteristic designs of political regimes such as monarchy, empire, and colonial states are precisely those in which the context-free, ground-detached design with which we are now familiar has been most consistently developed, often with remarkable constancy and little innovation.⁸ Royal, imperial, or military squares are manifestly hostile to any expression of freedom. The public's behavior is rigorously framed and channeled through coercive devices that discourage initiative and make any deviant conduct immediately visible. The constraints are postural, circulatory, communicational. The mineralized, emptied, planned, and leveled square grants no potential for action or pro-action to the public. Constraints can be circumvented only through transgression, which in turn reinforces them. Far from supporting the public in the exercise of freedom, the square conditions behavior and strictly limits it.

It is above all in totalitarian regimes that the public square reaches its most extreme, freedom-destroying consequences. For example, the physical organization of Tiananmen Square constitutes a large-scale mechanism of coercion.⁹ Mao Zedong multiplied its original size fourfold, so that it could contain one million people. On one side of the square stands his gigantic portrait.¹⁰ The space is oversized and so exposed to the elements and to surveillance that it became an accomplice in the atrocious suppression of the student movement in the spring of 1989. On June 4, artillery and tanks fired upon the crowd and crushed hundreds — perhaps thousands — of people.¹¹ Before that, another emblematic example of the political public square lay in the vast esplanades designed by the architect known as “Hitler’s devil,” Albert Speer. A great admirer of Haussmann’s Paris, Speer became chief builder of the Third Reich in 1934. Coupled with Hitler’s megalomania — he worked on plans for Germania, his ideal city, even in the bunker where he killed himself — Speer transformed

8 On this continuity, see George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich* (Ithaca-London: Cornell up, 1975).

9 See Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

10 See the online photo portfolio: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/gabrielsanchez/disturbing-pictures-from-the-tiananmen-square-massacre>.

11 British documents declassified in December 2017 indicate a far larger massacre. In a 1989 telegram, Alan Ewen Donald, United Kingdom ambassador to China from 1988 to 1991, reportedly relayed an estimate by a member of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China placing the number of civilian victims at 10,000, most of whom were crushed by tanks.

the public square into a site for civil and military parades, designing the *Reichsparteitagsgelände*, an enormous structure capable of accommodating up to 340,000 people. Speer's idea, writes historian Matthias Donath, was that people should appear tiny and lost in immensity, mere constituent elements of the mass that made up the national community.¹² Construction began in 1938, but halted in 1943. Only a foundation block exists today, cast in 1941 to test the soil's resistance: a cylindrical mass of concrete weighing 12,360 tons, 14 meters high and 21 meters in diameter, made by French forced laborers.

The democratic square denotes — or should denote, though it is rarely realized — characteristics opposed to those described above. In particular, it is neither mineral nor geometric nor hollowed out nor leveled, but, as a few examples show, full of plants, reliefs, distinctive places, and corners. Like the Athenian agora before the fifth century bce and the Roman forum before Caesar, it follows the natural terrain, extends toward building façades, incorporates remnants of the past, and lends itself to subdivision and reconfiguration according to need. Contrary to the regular, empty space that often comes to mind when we imagine the agora as the site of the citizens' assembly, the public squares of ancient Greece — including the famous Athenian Agora — were in fact irregular and complex until the major works of Hippodamus of Miletus, credited with inventing the grid design, which coincided with the democratic regime's erosion and ultimate disappearance.¹³ By examining the physical structure of ancient Greek squares, we gain insight into essential aspects of democracy as a form of life. First, pre-Hippodamian squares — as well as Roman republican forums and the pre-humanist squares of Italy — resembled open-air salons where everyone passed through and mingled. Citizens crossed paths with artists and performers, wanderers and philosophers, numerous merchants who called out to potential clients, barbers, shopkeepers, and artisans whose workshops opened directly onto the square — people of all sorts who came to talk, to remake the world, or to play dice or hopscotch. In Aphrodisias, Ephesus, and Perge, large marble gaming tables decorated with carved ornaments and sometimes inscriptions have been found in public squares.¹⁴ This shows that political life was intimately interwoven with various aspects of social life. It escaped the essentialization ("The Political") that tends to separate political action from all other ways of existing and to hypostatize it. Yet what is politics, if not the efforts individuals make to live peacefully with one another? Democratic politics, in particular, relies on negotiated processes through which deadlocks in

12 See Matthias Donath, *Architektur in Berlin, 1933-1945* (Berlin: Lukas, 2004).

13 On these issues, see Maria Ananiadou-Tzimopoulou, Alexandra Yérolympos and Athina Vitopoulou, "L'espace public et le rôle de la place dans la ville grecque moderne: Évolution historique et enjeux contemporains," *Études balkaniques*, no. 14 (2007), 27-52.

14 See Ulrich Schädler, "Faire parler la matière: L'archéologie des jeux antiques: Entretien avec Ulrich Schädler," interview conducted and edited by Natalia La Valle, Barbara Turquier, and Bruno Vétel, *Tracés*, no. 28 (2015), 185-198.

social life, as identified by stakeholders, are politicized. Even Aristotle — far from opposing social life and political life, biological life and freedom — recognized that there is governance within a household, whose members, unlike sheep or bees, discuss together, based on “common notions,” the conditions of their coexistence. Self-government depends on this.

Second, democratic squares welcome nature. They do more than “make room” for it: they take it into account from the outset; they preserve and maintain it; sometimes they even venerate it. The palaver tree, the plane tree, the olive tree are not imported elements; they preexist. The very act of considering them affects social interactions. Relations that develop while ignoring or bracketing the surrounding environment differ fundamentally from those that invite nature as a partner in the relations at stake. The form of social life that tolerates a potted tree, a concrete pool, artificial snow, or air conditioning differs from one that constructs the square based, for example, on the slope of the terrain, the dominant wind direction, or the trees already present.

In Greek and later in other languages, *plateau*, *place*, *plan*, and *plane tree* (platane) share the same etymological family. Greek squares — *platia platanou* — like those of Mediterranean towns and villages in general, are plane-tree squares. The plane tree plays a well-recognized role. It grows near rivers, close to “runnels of water,” as in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (230b), or near water tables, for it requires a great deal of moisture.¹⁵ The paving of the square is designed to filter waste, allow water infiltration, aerate the soil, and support the growth of roots and trunk. The plane tree precedes the square and marks the starting point of the village. It is credited with numerous virtues — in Greece and Italy especially — above all that its shade benefits mood and health. Socrates discovers the marvelous shade of the plane tree thanks to Phaedrus, who leads him outside the city. That particular plane tree came from Persia. Pliny, the Elder, notes that it was imported to Anatolia, then to Laconia and Italy “for its shade alone” — “for its shade alone” indicating that the tree has no advantage other than its shade: it yields neither fruit nor usable wood, the latter being too difficult to work.¹⁶ It was also beneath the ancient plane tree in the square of Kos that Hippocrates taught medicine and composed his works. He too valued the plane tree’s shade for its therapeutic properties. Perhaps he perceived, in the physical and aesthetic union of the plane tree with its site, a form of balance and harmony conducive not only to justice and friendship, as Socrates and Phaedrus experienced in their dialogue, but also to health and to the ethics of medical practice, of which Hippocrates is the renowned founding figure. At the location of that tree — where he once stayed — there survives today its descendant, 500 years old, reputed to be

15 See Maria Ananiadou-Tzimopoulou, Alexandra Yérolympos and Athina Vitopoulou, “L’espace public et le rôle de la place dans la ville grecque moderne.”

16 Pliny, the Elder, *The Natural History*, vol. 3, *Trees — their various qualities*, trans. John Bostock and Henry Thomas Riley (London: Bohn, 1855), §6.

the oldest plane tree in the world. The circumference of its trunk reaches more than 12 meters. Fragments circulate around the world. New trees are also planted to express medical art and the universal importance of its ethical principles. Since antiquity, the plane tree has been regarded as an air purifier. The physician-botanist Pierre-Joseph Buc'hoz wrote that the plane tree "contributes to the purity of the air [...] and to the salubrity of this region. It is considered a true specific against plague and all sorts of aerial corruptions."¹⁷

The plane tree is more than a symbol. Certainly, it is rightly associated with longevity — its lifespan far exceeding that of human life — and with continuity, notably the continuity of tradition (including the medical tradition) that persists through the ages. But it is rather its factual existence that strikes the mind: its appearance, its properties, its often-noted balsamic scent — believed to ward off illness — its relationship to water. Fountains are never far from it. In some cases, a tap is fixed directly onto its trunk. With plane trees, squares become multispecies landscapes whose configuration reveals the links between ecology and democracy. This connection extends to the question of food. A well-known example is the Roman republican forum, designed to establish a lasting and manifest connection among society, nature, culture, and agriculture. Edible plants were part of the city, while plant cultivation was understood as the foundation of any meaningful cultural development. Demeter, goddess of agriculture and civilization, watched over it. In contrast to the imperial forum, which under Julius Caesar became mineralized, specialized, and standardized, the republican forum contained temples and meeting places, the speakers' tribune, public libraries, baths, and shops — and also a little-noticed but decisive feature: a square area four meters on each side that was never paved, even though the rest of the space was covered in travertine. Within this area stood — and still stand — a fig tree, a grapevine, and an olive tree. The current specimens were planted in 1956.

This dialogical relationship between the square and natural phenomena is partially preserved during the imperial period. The fig-tree area survives. The Pantheon, built by Agrippa, for instance, is topped by a dome left open at its apex so that the building remains in contact with the elements. According to Marguerite Yourcenar, "[t]his temple, both open and mysteriously enclosed, was conceived as a solar quadrant [...]; the disk of daylight would rest suspended there like a shield of gold; rain would form its clear pool on the pavement below; prayers would rise like smoke toward that void where we place the gods."¹⁸ The ecology of public squares is thus a key element in the democratization of public spaces. If environmental

17 Pierre-Joseph Buc'hoz, *Dissertations sur le cèdre du Liban, le platane et le cytise: Arbres très-intéressants, et qui méritent d'être cultivés en France, non-seulement par leur port majestueux et par leur décoration dans nos forêts, mais encore par les avantages réels qu'ils nous présentent pour l'Agriculture et les Arts, leur culture étant d'ailleurs très-facile* (Paris: Buc'hoz, 18062), 24.

18 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadria* (1951), trans. Grace Frick and Marguerite Yourcenar (London: Secker & Warburg, 1955), 176.



FIG. 1

The fig tree, the grapevine, and the olive tree (photo by the author)

coercion through architecture — one that denies or even destroys its environment — gravely impacts human relations and imprints upon them a similar violence, it is because consciousness and acknowledgment of the world outside ourselves, of alterity, of the being-other, form the foundation of the values that collectively constitute the basis of political democracy. On the one hand, the environmental or “landscape” square — one that works with the elements, climate, and plants — is also one that grants each being, including humans, a margin of free evolution. “Gardens in movement” (in Gilles Clément’s phrase),¹⁹ permaculture gardens, trees whose aerial and subterranean development depends on neighboring plants, wild grasses — these are sources of inspiration and images of freedom capable of prefiguring human behaviors better attuned both to one another and to their surroundings. The few wild animals that many of us admired from our windows — and that moved millions of people during the April 2020 lockdown — were not exotic creatures. Yet they were perceived as symbols of regained freedom, a breath of fresh air in constraining and suffocating cities, a door opening onto nature. Much has since been said about “reconnection” with nature, but the essential point lies elsewhere. Mere knowledge of our connection or interdependence with some reality does not in itself lead to democratic behavior. The master knows he is connected to the slave, and vice versa. This awareness becomes democratic only when transformed into a springboard for liberatory action. By contrast, awareness of the independence of the animals we observed

19 See Gilles Clément, *Le Jardin en mouvement* (Paris: Pandora, 1991).

— moving freely in spaces not meant for them (an avenue, a forecourt, a quay) — proved decisive. We, watching from our windows, had no connection with these beings temporarily freed from the pressure we exert upon them. We recognized, and even valued, the fact that their logic was not ours, their behavior unpredictable, their uses of the city unprecedented.

Freedom does not arise from respect or free will, but from the concrete arrangement of the right distance one that must constantly be adjusted: neither too close nor too far. Democratic relations presuppose a gap between beings who are destined neither to merge nor to dominate one another. This is the work of a public designer committed to democratic principles: to configure public places in such a way that individuals can freely adjust their position with respect to the surrounding world, while preserving that world as such. A good example is Place d'Austerlitz in Strasbourg. Located in the Bourse-Krutenau district, it underwent a participatory redesign beginning in 2008, in which residents and local associations were actively involved. Since June 2012, the former bus-station crossroads has been transformed into a pedestrian area alternating playgrounds, urban furniture, café terraces, spaces for relaxation and soft mobility, and, of course, vegetated areas with exclusively native plants. It has become "an archipelago of nature between the historic and modern city," making it, with its thousands of bulbs and shrubs, its trees, and its 2,600 m² of plantings, the most beloved and frequented square in Strasbourg.²⁰ The square is at once one and multiple. It is a square made of squares, separating activities (those of children climbing the reliefs designed for them and those of adults seated at the adjoining café terrace) while also connecting them. The disjunction of spaces makes movements at different scales and speeds compatible. Like a Japanese garden, Place d'Austerlitz cannot be seen all at once. One must move through it to discover all its aspects; hence it offers surprises.

How does all this testify to democratic concerns? The reasons are many and interwoven. The main one lies in the substitution of action for spectacle. The traditional square is the space of "theatrocracy" (*Leg.* 701a).²¹ The individual faces a spectacle that they contemplate and to which they adhere or which they critique. The spectator's reaction varies depending on the devices deployed (propaganda, deception, edification, publicity of power, threat, etc.), but it remains a reaction — not an action. By definition, a spectator does not act upon the action they observe. Yet this is not the vocation of the citizen: the citizen's task is to practice self-government, to take initiative, to conduct their affairs and thoughts without placing themselves under the authority of a tutor, to associate freely with others, and

20 See <https://lollier.com/projets/reaménagement-de-la-place-dausterlitz/>. See also Martine Meunier, "Un archipel de nature en ville," *Horticulture et paysage* (2015), 43-45.

21 Cited in Vincent Azoulay, "L'Espace public et la cité grecque: d'un malentendu structurel à une clarification conceptuelle," in *L'espace public au Moyen Âge*, ed. Patrick Boucheron and Nicolas Offenstadt (Paris: PUF, 2011), 74.

so on. Politics begins with participation and, ideally, never departs from it. Thus, a democratic square should not be a “case” in which people’s behavior is either displayed or confined, but “animated theaters,” as Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis wrote of the squares of Naples.²² Architecture propels and stimulates experience. Space becomes a site for improvisation, exploration, and discovery. In sharp contrast with spaces that are either too vast or too cramped — spaces that authoritatively orient people’s behavior, standardize it, divide it, and forbid any overflow — democratic places encourage uses not defined in advance and possess a plasticity that allows their reconfiguration. It is significant, for example, that Place d’Austerlitz, co-conceived and co-designed by residents, has since 2014 been protected and continually adapted by a local monitoring committee composed of residents who meet three times a year.

Plane-tree squares and other tree-filled squares are only examples among many possible ecologies of public squares. We might also consider other variables: the use of local materials, attention to topography, the role of urban wildlife — wild or feral — orientation relative to wind or the sun’s trajectory, and so forth. In every case, it becomes clear that a space is public, common, democratic only insofar as it is integrated into a social and physical environment. We might also consider underground waterways which, as in Paris — from Place des Fêtes to Bastille via République — link urban squares through canals. In the past, these squares housed hydraulic structures and served as points for the distribution of drinking water. At the site of today’s Place de la République once stood the Château d’Eau square and its Nubian Lions Fountain (1811), created by an engineer whose ambition was to bring water to the upper floors of working-class neighborhoods: the humanist Pierre-Simon Girard.²³ But the transformation of public squares into instruments of power under Napoleon III erased most features testifying to the natural grounding of Parisian squares. The water is still there, but the canals through which it flows — especially the junction between the Canal de l’Ourcq and the Canal Saint-Martin, as well as the entire route from République to Bastille — are invisible and inaccessible.

The anti-nature character of classical squares thus manifests the political conception whose unfolding has led to denaturing democracy and nature simultaneously. Space destined for the aestheticization of some form of power paralyzes citizens’ capacity for action and confines them to the role of spectators of the domination exercised upon them. It standardizes gestures, opinions, and behaviors. It homogenizes, as in a vast crowd, the ways of acting of individuals who thereby become indistinguishable. The

22 Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis, *Naples* (1925), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (London: Belknap, 1996), 417.

23 Margaret Bradley, “Pierre-Simon Girard, un des premiers ingénieurs des Ponts et Chaussées: du Nil à l’Ourcq,” *Bibnum* (2014), <https://journals.openedition.org/bibnum/658>.

spectacle does not address each person's individuality — which it negates — but rather what is generic in us, what makes us “similar” to all others. By contrast, as soon as the buds of a tree open or a flock of crows settles, what takes place escapes the interhuman framework within which precise control is possible, the identical prevails over the other, and monism over pluralism. Making public squares into places where nature is present — not mineral, nor even re-naturalized, greened, or vegetated after the fact — also means establishing an essential condition for the realization of free, personal, and varied ways of life, which are the hallmark of specifically democratic forms of living.

Joëlle Zask, is a French philosopher and translator who teaches at Aix-Marseille University. A specialist in political philosophy, pragmatism, and political ecology, she is among the first academics and authors to have explored participatory democracy, autonomy, and self-governance.

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MAIN SECTION

Embodied Epistemologies and Ethics of Care: Rethinking the City as a Passionate public space

Federica Castelli — Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy
Contact: federica.castelli@uniroma3.it

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the nexus between politics, bodies, and urban spaces from an intersectional, transfeminist, and queer perspective. By questioning traditional approaches to public space, it argues that the relationship between bodies and the city is historical, contingent, and rooted in power dynamics, while also constituting a key site for practices of resistance and political creation.

Drawing on trans/feminist tools—namely the practice of positioning, the embodied gaze, and the ethics of care—the paper re-reads urban dynamics as inherently political, taking into account bodies, emotions, postures, and collective gestures, and challenging the foundational private/public dichotomy. Transfeminist and queer movements thus point toward a new epistemology of the city, one that disrupts the public space of Western patriarchal traditions and their claims to homogeneity and universality, revealing cities as traversed, contested, teeming, and passionate spaces.

KEYWORDS

Public Space; Ethics of Care; Embodied Subjectivities; Political Practices; Emotions

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Power, politics, public space

It is well established, both in the scientific literature and in political activism, that politics, power, and urban space are deeply intertwined. Academic scholarship on this topic is extensive, and over the past twenty years there has been a strong re-emergence of political groups emphasizing the inextricability of this relationship. These movements have given renewed life to the idea—originally articulated by Henri Lefebvre in the 1970s—that space is inherently political.¹

On the one hand, we know that the very idea of space is intrinsically political and changes across historical contexts and social cultures. Urban spaces, far from being merely material backdrops for social interactions, are also symbolic spaces that transcend their physical boundaries and transform in relation to each society's understanding of itself, of otherness, and of politics. Public space is thus contingent and mutable: its interpretations—and even the emotional relationships we establish with it—shift over time and according to our position within society.

The city is the space we inhabit, where social activities and interactions are conceived and enacted; it is where taxonomies, exclusions, and relationships among social actors are defined, and where our relationship with otherness is articulated. It is also the space in which we emerge as social and political subjects, and where politics takes on specific, situated forms. As such, the city is the site of both individual and collective dynamics that shape everyday experience.

If, following Hannah Arendt,² we define politics not merely as an institutional domain but as a space of acting together—“in concert”—an *in-between* marked by initiative, relation, contingency, and the unexpected, brought onto the scene by singular, unique, and unrepeatable subjects, then it becomes evident that politics itself is relational and deeply connected to material space. The notion of politics as a *space of appearance*³ highlights the relationship between physical sites and political subjects as corporeal, situated beings.

Within this framework, space entails the physical and corporeal materiality of politics. It is not closed and, like Arendt's space of politics, does not pre-exist the individual and collective actions that take place within it. Rather, it is populated and constituted through conflict; it is 'striated'.⁴ Like the space of the *agora*, it does not have a fixed or definite form but instead functions as a *void* that enables the free movement of people and

1 Henri Lefebvre, *Espace et politique. Le droit à la ville II* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1958)

3 Ibid.

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 474-500.

opinions.⁵ Here, “void” does not signify a lack of reality or an emptiness to be filled or managed, but rather an indeterminate space without pre-established identities.⁶

On the other hand, feminist political theory has long emphasized that power and politics are not the same thing.⁷ Thus, while the city is a space that enables interactions, relations, and political practices, it is also the site where power is articulated and continuously reconfigured. Urban space can be understood as power made stone: power materialized in buildings, squares, and streets, but also in walls and fences. Its forms and structures reflect the power relations that traverse it, such that social and political transformations—even the most traumatic ones—are always accompanied by changes in urban routes, profiles, and spatial arrangements.

Lines of power and domination shape both society and its spatial organization. Urban space is conceived, designed, and governed through specific cultural, social, economic, and political dynamics that orient human experiences and possibilities, defining access to and participation in public space in unequal ways across different subjects and social groups. In this sense, the city functions as a *dispositif* of power—in Foucauldian terms—shaping subjects’ perceptions and relationships while simultaneously opening or closing spaces of political possibility by positioning bodies at the center or the margins of public space.⁸

If physical barriers such as walls, enclosures, and fences restrict movement and circulation, exclusion also operates through narratives and rhetoric that determine what—and who—is considered legitimate within public space. Being a man, a non-racialized woman, a migrant, a non-heteronormative subject, or a poor and marginalized person produces profoundly different urban experiences. Even when crossing the same square, in the same city, at the same time, these subjectivities are exposed to different gazes: indifference, suspicion, fear, disapproval, or objectification. Such divisions translate into unequal possibilities of speaking and acting in public space.

Similarly, the dichotomies of public/private, domestic/political, individual/social—and, consequently, production/reproduction—structure social imaginaries and self-perceptions, shaping individual and collective experiences along lines of gender, racialization, class, religion, and ableism. These distinctions determine whether one is recognized—or not—as a political subject in public space and are often internalized through bodily habits. Moving through the city, accessing certain areas, being prevented

5 Dario Gentili, “Topografie della piazza: *agorà, arengo, square*”, in *Dire, fare, pensare il presente*, cur. Laboratorio Verlan (Macerata: Quodlibet), 69.

6 Dario Gentili, “Spazi di aspettativa,” *Aut Aut* 368 (2015): 113.

7 Diotima, *Potere e politica non sono la stessa cosa* (Napoli: Liguori, 2009).

8 Pierre Bourdieu, *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (1993), trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

from entering others, and appearing in public are all deeply political matters. Space is political not only because it hosts political action, but because it is produced and organized through power relations.

The inability to access or appear in public space has specific political consequences. Those who cannot cross it, who cannot be visible within it, are effectively excluded from public life, experiencing a partial or hollow form of citizenship. Citizenship is inextricably bound to the spatiality of politics: both to the material conditions of place and to the possibility of appearing and acting in public, which, as Arendt reminds us, grounds political action. As this analysis suggests, any attempt to articulate a new understanding of public space requires a critical reconsideration of the public/private distinction. These terms do not merely designate separate social spheres; they also operate as cultural and social classifications, discursive strategies that produce oppression, marginalization, and hierarchy. In doing so, they legitimize certain interests and claims while delegitimizing others, ultimately calling into question the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere as a space of discursive interaction among equal actors.⁹

One of the main ambiguities in debates on public space stems from the constant oscillation between its understanding as a physical and material site and its metaphorical meaning as a political arena. By engaging in this overlap, it becomes possible to show how public space, even when conceived as a political space, is always rooted in a physical and material dimension.

In the neoliberal context, it is impossible to overlook a renewed convergence between the question of public space and that of territory. Here, the term “public” no longer refers to a sphere in its own right, nor to the abstract, immaterial, and rational space imagined by Jürgen Habermas. Instead, it takes on a material, physical, embodied, and deeply conflictual meaning, one that binds it closely to urban spaces. This physicality becomes particularly evident in its entanglement with the digital—whose developments dematerialize neither bodies, nor relations, nor politics—and with the dynamics of global finance, processes that sharply intensify the nexus between embodied subjectivities, politics, and space.

For these reasons, it is crucial to emphasize the interconnection between the political and the spatial, as well as between symbolic and material dimensions, within the concept of “public space.” We deliberately prefer this term to the English and Italian translations of Habermas’s concept of *Öffentlichkeit* as “public sphere,” a formulation that carries significant critical limitations due to its implicit connotations of homogeneity, closure, and separateness. While the notion of a “sphere” evokes a bounded, closed, and ostensibly egalitarian entity, a “space” is traversed, inhabited, constituted, and animated by actors and relations.

9 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (1981), trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1987).

Rather than being defined by borders and limits that determine what is legitimate and what is not, space can be understood as open and continually produced through the practices that take place within it. Urban spaces are not homogeneous; they are shaped by the diverse uses and practices of those who inhabit them and who constantly reconfigure them through desires, everyday actions, and often creative and unexpected forms of appropriation. The city can thus also function as a space of reappropriation, legitimation, and self-determination. As a public space, it emerges as a battleground in which different visions of politics, social relations, and modes of coexistence confront one another.

Neoliberal public spaces

As discussed above, relations of social domination can be directly correlated with the organization of urban space. In neoliberal public spaces, these geographies of expulsion produce precarious, degraded, and marginalized areas, increasingly separated from political action and characterized by forms of confinement from which escape appears impossible.¹⁰ Over recent decades, processes such as the proliferation of gated communities, the construction of new enclosures, and dynamics of dispossession, ghettoization, and gentrification have generated conditions of isolation for specific social groups, thereby defining who is allowed to be visible in public space.¹¹ Within these dynamics, some subjectivities become more invisible than others, more vulnerable, and more exposed to violence.

Expelled or only partially included subjects move through urban imaginaries like ghosts: relegated to the background, perceived as negative presences or as threats. They appear as absences, evoked only through details, through elements that remain 'out of place' with respect to the order of the 'decent' city.¹²

As anticipated, transformations in spatial organization also correspond to a redefinition of what counts as human, political, and social.¹³ If the subject of modern public space was historically constituted by the collective of civil society, this connection is progressively disrupted by processes of globalization and by the emergence, within neoliberal rationality, of new configurations of the social-individual relationship. With the rise of consumer society, massification through atomization intensifies:

10 Bourdieu, *Weight of the World*.

11 Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge: hup, 2014); Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (San Francisco: pm 2018).

12 Serena Olcuire, "Città a misura di donne o donne a misura di città? La mappatura come strumento di governo e sovversione del rapporto tra sicurezza e genere," in *La libertà è una passeggiata. Donne e spazi urbani tra violenza strutturale e autodeterminazione*, cur. Ead., Chiara Belingardi e Federica Castelli (Roma: iaph Italia, 2019), 85-100.

13 Tiziana Villani, "Ethos e Pathos: Mutazioni del corpo-territorio nel tempo dell'adesso," *Millepiani* 28 (2004): 51.

the isolation of individuals proceeds alongside the homogenization of behaviors, commodification, and conformism. Under neoliberalism, however, this nexus is further reconfigured through forms of passive and non-subjectivizing aggregation, produced by flows, data, and algorithms that classify individuals according to consumer preferences rather than political agency. At the same time, neoliberal labor organization undermines the possibility of autonomous collective subjectivation, producing a fragmented multiplicity of social subjects unified only by their shared subjection to market logics.

Cities thus become sites of a troubling convergence between neoliberal rationality and functionalist approaches to urban design. Together, these frameworks regulate spaces, behaviors, and individuals, giving rise to de-urbanizing and de-subjectifying processes.¹⁴ Even in the governance of urban space, a technocratic vision prevails—one that redefines spaces, and consequently behaviors, through indices, data, and rules presumed to be neutral and universally applicable. In the attempt to reduce urban complexity, cities increasingly experience fragmentation, the crisis of coexistence, isolation, the defensive erection of boundaries, and the desertification of spaces. Yet the lived city, by contrast, operates through incoherence, temporality, and conflict.¹⁵

While neoliberalism could be read simply as a moment of destruction or disappearance of public space, such an interpretation would be incomplete. Even as spaces fragment or dissolve, new physical and virtual arenas of political action are emerging. Many global protest movements since 2010–2011 have not only exposed and contested the neoliberal reorganization of citizenship and space, but have also produced sites of collective reappropriation, disrupting exclusions and generating what can be described as “passionate public spaces.”¹⁶

Movements such as Occupy, Ni Una Menos, the Indignados in Spain, Right to the City initiatives, the Arab Spring, and more recently Fridays for Future or the university encampments protesting the genocide in Palestine, have all sought to reclaim the capacity for collective action beyond the traditional representational forms of institutional politics. This reappropriation of political agency has unfolded through the reappropriation of urban space itself. These new and unforeseen forms of resistance have placed different corporealities and their relationships to urban space at the center of political struggle, redefining the boundaries

14 Cristina Bianchetti, *Spazi che contano: Il progetto urbanistico in epoca neoliberale* (Milano: Donzelli, 2016).

15 *ibid.*, 11–14.

16 Federica Castelli, “Spazio pubblico appassionato: Corpi e protesta tra esposizione, vulnerabilità e relazioni,” *Leussein* 9, no. 1–3 (2016): 85–93.

and exclusions of contemporary public space and restoring the collective power of bodies to the heart of political debate.¹⁷

Bodies assembled in squares pose urgent questions to politics: they interrogate the meaning of the “public” and challenge its dichotomies, structures, and hierarchies. Understood as sites of resistance, expression, relation, and political creation, bodies reweave, within the shared political imagination, the fundamental connection between embodiment and politics.

An embodied epistemology

In recent years, the relationship between space and politics has been at the center of numerous feminist and queer debates. Many of these approaches locate this nexus precisely in the political nature of bodies that inhabit and appear within space.¹⁸ From this perspective, space emerges as relational: a contingent event generated through practices of care and sharing among embodied subjectivities.¹⁹

Among the political tools developed within these frameworks, at least three key practices stand out for their capacity to disrupt one of the most effective dispositifs of political oppression and exclusion in public space—namely, the gendered dichotomy between public and private, together with the oppositions it produces (production/reproduction, political/unpolitical, male/female). These practices include feminist positioning, the concept of situated knowledge,²⁰ and the intersectional approach.²¹

When the “public” is read through the feminist practice of positioning—where the personal is understood as political—it reveals itself as a symbolic and material dimension that is historical, contingent, and continuously in the making, rather than given once and for all. The intersectional approach, by demonstrating how different social categories operate within mechanisms of marginalization, calls into question both the application of these categories and the relations between subjects and collectivity.

Together, intersectional analysis, feminist embodied thinking, and gender and queer theory contribute to the deconstruction of Western dichotomies—first and foremost that between public and private. In doing so,

17 Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler, *Dispossession: The performative in the political* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: hup, 2015); David Harvey, *Rebel Cities* (New York and London: Verso, 2012).

18 Rosi Braidotti, *Per una politica affermativa: Itinerari etici* (Milano e Udine: Mimesis, 2017); Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

19 Adriana Cavarero, “Il locale assoluto,” *Micromega* 5 (2001): 64-73.

20 Adrienne Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location” in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Little Brown & Co., 1984); Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985), in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

21 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167.

they open new reflections on agency and performativity, shifting the focus from the problem of inclusion to that of self-determination in public space. In recent years, urban feminist, transfeminist, and queer movements have emphasized the *creation* of spaces for self-determined interactions and the *occupation* of public spaces—especially those from which certain bodies are excluded—as a radical political practice.²²

By applying an intersectional gaze to discourses of exclusion, these movements have exposed how the purported neutrality of public space functions as a mechanism of oppression, organizing and closing spaces while preventing crossings. Public space is in fact structured through a gaze that presents itself as neutral and universal while concealing its own partiality. This gaze is predominantly Western, masculine, ableist, and bourgeois, organizing space through rigid and oppositional categories that claim to represent—by means of fixed crystallizations—the plurality of ways of being in the world.

Bodies have a spatial dimension. This may seem obvious yet traces of it appear in our most original experiences: as children, we encounter the world not only visually but also tactically, learning to move by sensing the boundaries of the surrounding space.²³ This tactile engagement with places is accompanied by an awareness of our own body as a spatial entity—a place among other places. Feminist movements remind us that bodies are inherently political. They are sites of openness, relationality, rootedness, and resistance. Every action involves a cohabitation of body and world—echoing Maurice Merleau-Ponty²⁴—and the gestures and movements that occur in public space encode and sediment social and political universes.²⁵ The corporeal materiality of the body constitutes the point where space and politics intersect. Feminist theorists have long emphasized the relational, gendered, and material nature of bodies through the concept of embodied subjectivities, highlighting the intimate link between bodily, political, and spatial dimensions.²⁶

From this perspective, bodies are spatial, situated, and gendered: individual and collective experiences are inseparable from the contexts in which bodies are immersed. The body, always situated, cannot disregard the surrounding physical space, which shapes orientation and action. Traversed by material, symbolic, cultural, and social forces, bodies occupy the center of power dynamics operating at multiple levels, opening and

22 Giada Bonu Rosenkranz, Federica Castelli e Serena Olcuire, *Bruci la città: Generi, transfemminismi e spazi urbani* (Firenze: edifir, 2023).

23 Giuliana Bruno, "Frammenti di città," *DWF* 52 (2001): 68.

24 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Donald A. Landes (Milton Park: Routledge, 2014).

25 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

26 Elizabeth Grozs, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the politics of bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke up, 2006).

closing spaces of self-determination. At the same time, the body serves as the locus through which relational and political engagement with the world occurs—the point at which Arendtian “acting in concert,” at the heart of politics, takes root. Similarly, the representation of space is linked to a subject’s capacity to locate itself as a reference point within its surroundings: space is occupied, perceived, and traversed. It is never abstracted from this grounding. Even when imagined, space is experienced. The spatiality of scientific observation can never be separated entirely from lived spatial experience, as Merleau-Ponty emphasized in *Phenomenology of Perception*.²⁷ The “objective” space of scientific analysis is always mediated by this lived experience. Space is not passive, with the body merely subjected to it, nor is it a neutral container independent of what it holds. Rather, space enables and is transformed by relationships. Its spatiality does not exist independently: space exists in relation to objects and through movement. Shape, size, direction, location, dimension, and orientation derive from perceptual relations and the ways space is experienced; they are not inherent scientific properties of space.²⁸

According to Elizabeth Grosz, there are two models in Western thought that have conceptualized the relationship between the city and the body.²⁹ The first envisions the city as a product of human action: the city as reflection, projection, and creation of the body. In this model, the body comes first, shaping the surrounding space according to its needs. By contrast, the contemporary city is often read as a space of alienation that deprives bodies of their “natural” or “healthy” context.³⁰ This perspective places human beings at the center as sovereign subjects: they create urban space and produce history.

The second model relies on an assumed isomorphism between the human body and the city, understood as political space and, again, as the State.³¹ Its most famous formulation appears in Plato’s *Republic*, where the correspondence between the parts of the individual and those of the *polis* ensures that political order functions according to justice. This framework also appears in modern liberal thought of the seventeenth century. The political body in this model is implicitly male and constructed in opposition to nature, establishing a hierarchy between the natural and the cultural. The political body is a cultural artifact that supersedes the “natural” body, transforming its limits.³² Simultaneously, scientific, mathematical, and philosophical understandings of space have strongly influenced the ontological conception of the human.³³

27 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

28 Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 93.

29 *ibid.*, 105.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Adriana Cavarero, *Corpo in figure: Filosofia e politica della corporeità* (Milano: Feltrinelli 1995).

32 Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 106.

33 *ibid.*, 97.

The relationship between space and bodies is one of mutual and ongoing redefinition. Bodies are always situated in specific spatial and temporal contexts, in which space and time are only intelligible through corporeality, which provides the foundation for perception and representation.³⁴ The body, like subjectivity, is experienced as a spatial and temporal being. As Sara Ahmed observes, orienting or disorienting ourselves in space has both political and epistemological significance.³⁵ Even seemingly neutral distinctions—left and right, East and West, North and South, margin and center—carry social and political consequences. Space is organized according to asymmetrical distinctions, reflecting underlying power relations. Phenomenological and queer approaches, such as Ahmed's, emphasize that spaces are not external to bodies but function as a "second skin."³⁶ They also reveal absolute space as an abstraction: while space is where encounters occur, these encounters themselves, enacted by embodied subjects, produce space. Bodies acquire meaning and direction through movement, while space is continually shaped by the bodies that inhabit it.³⁷

Bodies are also socialized to move through space in particular ways, guided by specific perceptions, emotions, and possibilities. Colette Guillaumin speaks of an internalization of spatial confinement among female subjects, instilled through childhood education.³⁸ Similarly, Iris Marion Young analyzes how gender norms regulate the scope and manner of bodily movement in public space.³⁹ Earlier, Charlotte Perkins Gilman highlighted domestic space as a site of bodily domestication, illustrating the connection between space, posture, movement, and political action.⁴⁰ A body confined to the home becomes accustomed to sedentariness, shaped by everyday domestic practices. Thus, the embodied relationship to space is gendered. Western phallogocentric culture has historically assigned spatial characteristics and values that reflect a gendered vision, hierarchy, and taxonomy. Space has been subdivided according to gender roles: woman does not occupy space in the same way as man.⁴¹ Instead, she is often conceptualized as space for man, providing space for him, whereas man is associated with agency, movement, and temporality in Western thought.⁴²

34 Ibid., 84.

35 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

36 *ibid.*, 13.

37 *ibid.*, 12.

38 Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir: L'idée de nature* (Paris: iXe, 2016)

39 Iris Marion Young, "Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality," *Human Studies* 2, vol. 3 (1980): 137-156.

40 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (London: William Heinemann, 1904).

41 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984), trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: cup, 1984).

42 Grozs, *Space, Time, and Perversion*.

Public emotions

The ways in which bodies move through public space are political, as are the emotions that accompany these movements. Emotions shape what bodies do—or feel able to do—in public spaces; in this sense, they function as forms of reorientation.⁴³ At the same time, our affective relations with others define proximities and distances, shaping the space between bodies.⁴⁴ The discomfort that neoliberal public spaces inscribe on bodies—particularly those of women, feminized subjects, and other “unexpected” subjectivities located at the intersection of multiple axes of power, differentiation, and discrimination—produces clear divisions that appropriate and regulate space, matter, embodied subjects, and their relations.

Feminist movements, by linking the personal and the political, have long shown how bodily impressions and emotions are imbued with political meaning. Here, “the personal is political” signifies that politics unfolds through relationships, lived experiences, and imaginaries. It passes through embodied subjectivity, through our being situated and relational. The affective bonds or discomforts we experience in the places of everyday life are therefore political issues with tangible political effects.

In this sense, the city itself can operate as a dispositif of gender-based violence.⁴⁵ In recent years, transnational feminist and transfeminist movements—following diverse, plural, and often non-linear trajectories—have foregrounded questions of self-determination and sisterhood in opposition to securitarian and paternalistic approaches to public space and gender-based violence. Such violence has been recognized as a structural and pervasive feature of contemporary societies, manifesting through abuses, discriminations, expulsions, and hierarchies that are also embedded in the organization of urban places and spaces.⁴⁶ Mechanisms of exclusion from public space and confinement within the private sphere range from sexualizing and victimizing narratives to securitarian discourses, from populist rhetoric surrounding decorum and urban decay to the processes of fragmentation and privatization that characterize neoliberal cities.⁴⁷ Narratives surrounding female and feminized bodies in urban space thus activate processes of victimization, racialization of violence,

43 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2.

44 *ibid.*, 3.

45 Chiara Belingardi, Giada Bonu, Federica Castelli e Serena Olcuire, “Trasformare la paura: Pratiche di resistenza femminista, emozioni e spazio urbano,” *LoSquaderno* 57 (2020): 29-33.

46 Non Una Di Meno, *Abbiamo un piano: Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere*, https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/abbiamo_un_piano.pdf, (2017); Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*. (London: Verso, 2020); Rosenkranz, Castelli e Olcuire, *Bruci la città*.

47 Anna Simone, “Securitarismo, rischio ed uso strumentale del corpo delle donne,” in *Città. Politiche dello spazio urbano*, a cura di Chiara Belingardi e Federica Castelli (Roma: iaph Italia, 2016); Carmen Pisanello, *In nome del decoro: Dispositivi estetici e politiche securitarie* (Verona: ombre corte, 2017); Olcuire, “Città a misura di donne o donne a misura di città?”

and expulsion—not only from streets, but also from social systems more broadly.⁴⁸

Fear of violence, together with securitarian public discourse, operates as a gendered dispositif of power that weighs heavily on experiences of the street at all times of day. As discussed earlier, the convergence of neoliberal governance and functionalist approaches to urban design has generated new forms of division, segregation, and expulsion, producing de-urbanizing and, at the same time, de-subjectivizing processes. Feminist analyses have highlighted how exclusion from public space is primarily enacted through female and migrant bodies, within a nexus of sexist victimization and racialization reinforced by securitarian rhetoric and appeals to urban “decorum.”⁴⁹

Fear has thus become the dominant emotion shaping women’s experiences of urban movement in recent years and has gained significant visibility in public debate and policy-making. At the institutional and governmental level, this visibility has often corresponded to the instrumental use of fear as a mechanism of containment and further exclusion⁵⁰—one that aligns with securitarian agendas, lacks an intersectional perspective, and fails to account for subjects who do not conform to the figure of the white, native, heterosexual, cisgender woman. In this way, fear has been mobilized to limit access to and circulation within the city, frequently pushing “unexpected” bodies back into the private sphere.

Feminist practices of urban resistance, by contrast, have been grounded in a rethinking of fear as a political emotion and oriented toward the cultivation of collective force—rooted in sisterhood, relationships, and being together.⁵¹ Through practices of re-signification and collective re-occupation, these movements have enacted a fundamental rupture: they have de-individualized fear, transforming it into a shared and political affect. In doing so, they have reimagined the city as a space of desire—a passionate public space—shifting from private fear to public desire. By challenging discourses that construct women as passive victims, feminist practices have unsettled conventional notions of “security” and advanced an intersectional, grassroots understanding of safer spaces, reshaping urban environments through collective practices of self-determination.⁵²

48 Françoise Vergès, *Une Théorie féministe de la violence: Pour une politique antiraciste de la protection* (Paris: La fabrique, 2020).

49 Tamar Pitch, *Contro il decoro: L'uso politico della pubblica decenza* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2013); Simone, “Securitarismo, rischio ed uso strumentale del corpo delle donne.”

50 Belingardi, Bonu, Castelli, Olcuire, “Trasformare la paura.”

51 *ibid.*

52 Giada Bonu Rosenkranz, *Safer Spaces, Feminist Movements and Emotions: Affect into Action* (New York and London: Routledge, 2025).

Embodied care for passionate public spaces

Urban space is a crucial factor in the social and discursive processes through which bodies are defined: it shapes their contexts and coordinates while relating embodied subjectivities to one another. The city constitutes an intricate and interactive network that connects us, holding together an incalculable number of human activities, processes, and relationships, as well as economic flows, lines of power, forms of organization, and political, interpersonal, and affective modes of togetherness. At the heart of urban dynamics lies a fundamental political question: who has access to public space, and for what purposes? At the same time, space can function as the antechamber of an emancipatory spiral of social transformation.

Feminist and queer theories have clearly demonstrated that both politics and bodies are traversed by power relations while also constituting sites of resistance, conceivable from a radical perspective grounded in interdependence, situated practices, and self-determination.⁵³ These approaches have shown how spaces and their social meanings are shaped by gendered norms and behaviors through processes of sexualization of space. At the same time, they have transformed the margin into a site of resistance and political struggle, revealing how spatial positioning is deeply connected to emotional orientations and disorientations in relation to place, identity, and desire.⁵⁴

This perspective is closely linked to the political centrality that feminist thought has attributed to care. Following Joan Claire Tronto and Berenice Fisher, care can be defined as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.”⁵⁵ Feminist articulations of care disrupt neoliberal ontologies, economies, and policies by foregrounding an understanding of the human as an embodied, relational, interdependent, and vulnerable subject, and by rooting practices of care in politics rather than in relations of power.⁵⁶ From this standpoint, feminist practices of care can open up new ways of relating to the urban, centered on the commons and on practices of self-determination.

Applying feminist ethics of care to urban space entails disrupting traditional spatial approaches by reintroducing what has been “removed” from public life within social and spatial orders structured around the public/

53 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

54 bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework* 36 (1989): 15-23.

55 Joan Claire Tronto and Berenice Fisher, “Toward a feminist theory of caring,” in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, ed. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany, suny, 1990), 40, quote in Joan Claire Tronto, *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York and London: nyu Press, 2013), 19.

56 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso 2004); Tronto, *Caring Democracy*; Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2014), trans. Amanda Minervini, Stanford: SUP, 2016.

private divide.⁵⁷ It involves a movement toward another anthropology—based on interdependence rather than liberal individualism—another conception of bodies (not as performative or functional machines, but as embodied subjectivities), and another understanding of politics and its relationship to institutions. Care, understood as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible,” encompasses bodies, subjectivities, and the environment—the space around us—within a complex and interwoven web.

These pages have sought to highlight the profound and radical nexus between politics and space—an inescapable connection that is itself intertwined with the equally radical relationship between bodies and politics. From this nexus emerge foundational relations between public space—as the space of politics—and the physical and material environments that surround subjects as corporeal, situated, and relational beings. An intersectional and embodied approach to public space brings together several key elements: publicness, visibility, openness, and accessibility; contingent crossings, conflicts, and relationships; and an understanding of the public as a site of convergence for both material and immaterial processes.

Public space thus emerges as a political, symbolic, communicative, and semiotic sphere that cannot be separated from the materiality and spatiality of the social, and that is continually traversed by processes of territorialization and deterritorialization. It escapes the public/private dichotomy, the opposition between individual and collective, and any necessary identification with the State or with a fixed social group. One cannot be the public: one can only *be in public*.⁵⁸ Public space, therefore, takes shape as an unresolved and dynamic process, continually produced through interactions, exchanges, and conflicts between positionings and postures that are simultaneously political, corporeal, and spatial—and thus contingent and relational.

57 Laura Fano Morrissey and Giorgia Serughetti, *Utopie della cura: La politica trasformativa delle pratiche di comunità* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 2024).

58 Andrea Mubi Brighenti, “The Publicness of Public Space: On the Public Domain,” *Quaderni del dipartimento di sociologia e ricerca sociale* 49 (2010): 20.

Federica Castelli is a researcher in Political Philosophy at Roma Tre University. Since 2009, she has collaborated with *DWF – Donnawomanfemme*, where she is an editor, and has been a member of the editorial board of IAPh Italia, the Italian section of the International Association of Women Philosophers. For IAPh Italia, she edited *Atelier Città* and co-edited the volumes *Città. Politiche dello spazio urbano* (2016), with Chiara Belingardi, and *La libertà è una passeggiata. Donne e spazi urbani tra violenza strutturale e autodeterminazione* (2019), with Belingardi and Serena Olcuire. Together with Roberto Carocci, she co-edited *Femminismi: Idee, movimenti, conflitti* (Nova Delphi, 2021). She is the author of several books focusing on political thought, feminism, and urban space, including *Corpi in rivolta. Spazi urbani, conflitti e nuove forme della politica* (2015), *Il pensiero politico di Nicole Loraux* (2016), *Lo spazio pubblico* (2019), *Comunarde. Storie di donne sulle barricate* (2021), *Bruci la città. Generi, transfemminismi e spazio urbano* (2023, with Olcuire and Giada Bonu Rosenkranz), and *Jane Addams, Chicago e la Hull House. Una democrazia radicata* (2024).

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MAIN SECTION

The Disneylandization of the Historic City of Florence

Gregor Fitzi — Universität Viadrina Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät - Frankfurt (Oder), Germany
Contact: fitzi@europa-uni.de

ABSTRACT

This article theorizes the *Disneylandization* of historic cities through an in-depth sociological analysis of contemporary Florence. Building on the concept of *enrichment capitalism* developed by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, and extending debates on *Disneyfication* introduced by Alan Bryman, the study argues that Florence has moved beyond heritage valorization toward an emergent form of entertainment-industry capitalism. Drawing on participant observation conducted between 2021 and 2025 within the UNESCO-designated historic center, the article develops a phenomenology of overtourism focused on the proliferation of staged “authentic experiences,” the spectacularization of traditions, and the transformation of everyday urban practices into consumable events. These aesthetic and experiential shifts are interpreted through a dialogue with classical urban sociology, particularly the writings of Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu, to highlight a reversal of Florence’s historical role as an antidote to metropolitan alienation. The findings show how short-term rentals, real-estate speculation, and platform-driven tourism converge to convert the city center into a diffused hotel and entertainment park, progressively expelling residents and eroding living cultural heritage. The concept of *Disneylandization* is proposed as a critical tool for capturing this advanced stage of urban transformation in Italian cities of art.

KEYWORDS

Disneylandization; Overtourism; Entertainment-industry Capitalism; Urban Heritage; Florence

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1. Overtourism surpasses enrichment economy

Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre developed their concept of ‘enrichment capitalism’ by observing the transformation of the former workers’ city of Arles and the Castles of the Loire Valley into hotspots of mass tourism.¹ After the shutdown of the Railway Repair Workshops, Arles entered a period of economic decline marked by mass unemployment. However, the intervention of Maja Hoffmann and her Swiss-based Luma foundation introduced a complete contrast by transforming the city’s economic and cultural vocation.² Following the model of Bilbao’s recovery thanks to the implementation of the Guggenheim Museum, Hoffmann transformed the former industrial site of the city into an art show and production area with a new symbolic building dominating the skyline.³ Reproposing the architectural style of Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum, Frank Gehry realized the iconic Luma Tower to become the new symbol of the city. The Hoffmann investment was followed by other interventions of private and public donors to valorize Arles’s historical and artistic heritage: above all featuring Arles’s reminiscences in the work of Vincent van Gogh. What was previously the public patrimony of the city—according to Boltanski and Esquerre’s central thesis—became a touristic production machine substituting the traditional capital valorization by means of the production of industrial goods (or their maintenance in the case of Arles)—with a new form of capitalism founded on the economic valorization of cultural heritage.

Enrichment capitalism is seen as a direct consequence of the financialization trend that the economic system underwent during the neoliberal age. Putting more and more money into new schemes attracting rapid gains and promising speculative rewards also relocates material production to developing countries, where wages can be made more ‘cost-efficient’ and social security expenses are reduced to a minimum. Deprived of its historical channel of valorization via the production of goods, in its traditional territories across Europe, capitalism has invented new ways of valorization, often starting genuine processes of primitive accumulation based on the appropriation of common goods, such as material and immaterial heritage and cultural goods. Furthermore, booming revenues in the finance sector during speculative bubbles demand securitization through investment in real-estate. This leads to an increase in both property values and yields. It is a trend that triggers a race to discover new low-cost areas for property investment (such as the city of Berlin in the 1990s) and to invent new methods for improving property yields. Official statistics show that these processes have completely transformed the real-estate market in

1 Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

2 *ibid.*, 56–63.

3 See <https://www.luma.org/arles.html>.

Europe, making it much more expensive for its population to buy their own home.⁴ A classic development in the sense of the eternal struggle between industrial capital and ground rent—one would say.

Yet, the speculative turn also extended to intangible goods. European schemes for the protection of denominations permitted the commercialization of a number of traditional recipes thanks to the invention of products that characterize the identities of specific territories beyond the already established classical ones like Parmigiano Reggiano or Aceto Balsamico, thus attracting the attention of non-specialist tourists. The interesting aspect of this development—as remarked by Boltanski and Esquerre—is that product creation is supported by an intensified narrative invention. It is not just a particular object that is sold, e.g., a jar of preserves made from beans using a specific recipe. The entire narrative surrounding the tradition and the people who developed it is also sold alongside the jar of beans. This valorization mechanism assembling products and narratives constitutes a crucial element for the added value of a new class of commodities and slowly extends to the whole domain of cultural heritage, including monuments, buildings and artworks. This should be seen as the most interesting and at the same time concerning aspect of the issue. As we will see with reference to the Loire Valley Castles, visits to monuments transform into events, adding narrative elements to their historical and artistic content that highlight the particular experiential value tourists can enjoy. Visiting them is no longer just a form of cultural education; it adds real-life value to the trip and can be shared on social media.

What was once considered to be a cultural value in itself, a value involving public institutions that were duty-bound to intervene, so protecting and preserving the said value for future generations and accordingly investing taxpayers' money for this purpose, now becomes a tool for capital valorization. Due to the massive tax cuts for enterprises and higher earners that were introduced in the neoliberal age following the illusion of trickle-down economics,⁵ public funding for cultural heritage conservation has suffered such a significant reduction that it has often become impossible to fulfil the task. The relieved economic elite, however, often held back on the donations that their propagandists had predicted. The money flowed much more into unproductive luxury products and further financial speculation. This left the guardians of cultural heritage alone with the dilemma of its protection. The call for 'alternative financing options' grew louder, prompting a shift towards more creative approaches in the search for solutions.

The private sector has of course assumed a pioneering role in this regard.

4 See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Housing_price_statistics_-_house_price_index.

5 Joseph Stiglitz, "A critique to Trickle-down economics," *Exploring Economics*, 2015, <https://www.exploring-economics.org/de/entdecken/joseph-stiglitz-trickle-down-economics-is-absolute/>.

This happened in France earlier than in other countries. Thanks to the eternal rivalry between the two magnates Arnault and Pinault, the valorization techniques developed in the luxury goods sector expanded to *haute couture* and later to the art market.⁶ The proliferation of narratives that seek to justify the increasing senselessness of ready-made art products has undergone a manifest acceleration. The non-economic logic of art production, as recognized by Pierre Bourdieu,⁷ which posits the long-term rejection of cheap commercialization as a necessary precondition for the accumulation of symbolic capital by future avant-gardes, has been superseded by the sophisticated invention of extreme flexible last-minute narratives. These have the capacity to quickly adapt commodity-art to the prevailing ideological trends in the art market, thereby substituting art's symbolic capital. However, this process concomitantly results in a significant increase of volatility in the value of artworks.⁸

As I could observe in the course of another ethnographic research project, the logic reversal in the field of conservation for architectural and artistic heritage has led to the exemplary transformation of some of the most important Chateaux of the Loire Valley. For visitors, this phenomenon is particularly evident in the case of the privately owned Château de Chenonceau. The castle, which was constructed, embellished, and extended by a significant number of noblewomen and Queens of France, including Catherine de' Medici, is of substantial historical significance. Nevertheless, the preservation of the architectural structures and gardens represents a considerable challenge, particularly in view of the fact that access to public funding for restoration is becoming progressively more arduous. The proprietors of the castle have thus resolved to initiate a regulated metamorphosis of the site into a leisure destination, with the objective of transforming a visit to the castle into an event of both recreational and cultural significance. The experiment was successful, so that Chenonceau now attracts up to 800,000 visitors *per annum*.

In Chenonceau the visitor is accompanied through buildings and gardens by a well-structured narrative audio guide and is presented with a reconstruction of the rooms in which the illustrious owners of the castle lived from time to time. A representation of historical reality is proposed that becomes capable of conveying emotions, a feat further compounded by the impressive floral decorations, which are cyclically renewed using flowers and plants from the rich garden. As can be seen from the satisfied expressions of the visitors, the experiential journey works and is sealed by many a selfie in front of the important backdrop.⁹ The fact that the

6 Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichissement*, 287–325.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 29–141.

8 Gregor Fitzi, "The Heuristic Significance of Art Sociology," *Simmel Studies* 26, no. 1 (2022): 107–132.

9 Gregor Fitzi, "Participant observation notes," in *Project Overtourism* (manuscript, 2021–2025).

reconstruction of the historical apartments does not comply with philological criteria does not seem to shock visitors, even though it causes great scandal among historians at the nearby University of Tours. The paintings on display are mostly historical copies of originals made at various times and exhibited in other museums around the world. The fine tapestries come from other places and are from different eras than when the palace apartments were built or inhabited. However, this does not matter. What counts is the immediate experience of the place, beyond which most visitors prefer not to venture—this is a leading aspect of contemporary tourism. Added to these impressions is the aesthetic pleasure of visiting the well-kept gardens, the playful moment of walking through the labyrinth, which everyone enjoys.

At Chenonceau, one observes how the economy of heritage valorization that had impressed Boltanski and Esquerre is transformed into an economy of entertainment and experience generation. Here the approach is still practiced with a certain moderation—thanks also to the control that a single private ownership can exercise over the entire site. The transition from heritage valorization to entertainment and spectacularization, already visible in the case of the French cultural heritage, represents a fundamental analytical juncture to understand the transformation undergone by Italian cities of art and in particular Florence, which was the major subject of my participant observation during recent years. Here, in fact, one can witness how the transformation process in today's pathways of capital accumulation goes beyond the stage of the economy of valorization, described by Boltanski and Esquerre, to enter a further phase that characterizes itself as an 'entertainment-industry capitalism.' In a way, this is the novelty of the phenomena that can be observed in Florence.

2. The Florence case study

To illustrate the thesis concerning the unique aspect of the Florentine transformation I will proceed as follows. I will present an introductory brief history of tourism in Florence since the pandemic. Using the materials of a participant observation in the historical city center that corresponds with the 'UNESCO area' within the former 16th-century city walls, I then develop a phenomenology of the current overtourism trends in the city. Subsequently, I question the overall perception that is generated by the materials resulting from the participant observation in terms of sociological aesthetics. I proceed to compare them with the classical analysis of Florence as a 'city of art' in terms of Georg Simmel's contrast with the 'modern metropolis' produced by the development of the historical form of manufacturing capitalism in Berlin at the end of the 19th century. The results of the comparison are eventually discussed against the backdrop of the quantitative data concerning the business model of the 'diffused hotel' that characterizes the current tourism development in Florence and

the correlated tendency to real-estate speculation. In the conclusions, I show to what extent Florence not only represents a realization of the economy of enrichment in the style of Boltanski and Esquerre, but furthermore develops the traits of an economy of entertainment that is comparable to that of the us-American entertainment sites of Disneyland and Disney World and their neighboring cities.¹⁰

During the pandemic Florence's city center was completely empty. Walking around the area before the curfew at 10 pm was a surprising experience. One could guess at the proportions of space that conformed to city life during the heyday of its splendor in the Renaissance. After the pandemic, the then local administration conceded a phase of strong deregulation in every touristic activity, thus hoping to encourage rapid recovery from the losses of the foregone period when hardly any tourists came to Florence. Entire streets were filled with tables and chairs and a joyfully anarchic and alcohol-fuelled atmosphere spread. Restaurants no longer waited for their clients and started to accept massive reservations from tour operators to fill their halls. Lunch and dinner started to be served in a half-hour rhythm generating huge queues waiting in front of restaurant doors—both aspects being completely unusual phenomena for Florence. The already thriving short-time rentals boomed after the pandemic, transforming the whole UNESCO zone into a diffused hotel, thus generalizing the business model and awakening interest of financial speculators. As a real-estate agent testified in an interview: "In the past people came into my office asking what the square-metre price was for an apartment, now they only ask what the average return per night is."¹¹

Florence is a city whose population traditionally votes for leftist parties. The municipal administrations since 2009 were led by the center-left, moderate leftist party *Partito Democratico*. At the same time, this had been strongly influenced by the pre dominant neoliberal ideology, and exhibited a protracted reluctance to intervene vigorously to control the economic development trends, as these increased the flow of money into the city and thus also into the municipal coffers. International online platforms increased the provision not only of apartments but also of 'authentic experiences' that tourists can collect during a stay in the historical city center. Thus, hundreds of city tours on golf-cars, electric scooters,

10 The concept of 'Disneylandization' that I am introducing here differs from Alan Bryman's concept of 'Disneyization' in that Bryman focuses on the expansion of entertainment modalities typical of Disney's narrative landscapes beyond the boundaries of Disney's corporate sites. See Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (London: SAGE, 2004). Theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising and performative labor are crucial topics there (ibid., 2). The concept of Disneylandization broadens this focus by demonstrating how the process of creating 'authentic experiences' transforms existing sites, such as historical city centers, into entertainment parks, in line with the 'adventure society' theory developed by Gerhard Schulze in his study of the invention of experience. See Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 1993). The term 'Disneylandization' may sound exaggerated, but it is not without merit. The developments taking place in Florence's city center are indeed of a striking innovative intensity that they demand a specific denomination.

11 Fitzi, "Participant observation notes."

self-balancing monowheels groups started to cross the historical center shouting instructions to participants through their loudspeaker. An infinite number of visits were organized to the last surviving 'traditional stores' selling milk, cheese, or ham, joining the streets where not every spot had already been occupied by restaurants and fast foods. Added to this a number of 'authentic cooking experiences' by the inhabitants were proposed transforming even families' private lives into a commercial product. For the residents, the perception of the city has extremely rapidly transformed. Among other transformations of public space, overtourism induced an extension of its interest area to the whole of the city center—including the recovery districts where the Florentines used to go to avoid the hustle and bustle and escape the complete commercialization of their life-world. Today there is a diffused feeling of a loss of control over the city: everyday life seems to be completely steered by the algorithms of the major internet platforms for the tourism business. This has generated reactions of protest and tourism refusal, as has happened in many other tourism hotspots around the world. I have followed, and continue to follow, the initiatives of the inhabitants' and residents' movements who go on expressing their critical views, such as the *comitato 'Salviamo Firenze per Viverci.'* These have certainly succeeded in influencing a change of attitude within the municipal administration. However, unlike in Barcelona, for example, it does not seem that citizen mobilization is able to counteract the general development trend, which is greatly exacerbated by intense property speculation, particularly within the UNESCO-designated historic center.

The incumbent municipal administration, led by a woman who grew up in the city center and with a clear perception of the transformations taking place, was confronted by the increasing discontent of the city dwellers and started to act more decisively to control the transformation. The situation, however, is as follows. Tourism operators constantly invent new business models that the municipal administration tries to sort out afterwards, without being able to rely on a comprehensive regulation of the phenomenon that, unlike the city-state of Barcelona, can only be adopted at the national level. It is like a game of cat and mouse in a context of a lack of legislation, as the central government in Rome refuses to intervene and even boycotts the measures adopted by the commune or the Region Tuscany.¹² The history of the attempts to regulate the phenomenon at a local level can be summarized as follows. Since 2015 the Florentine administration intervened to delimit the opening of more hotels and restaurants in the city center. Every regulation was only possible in an indirect way by appealing to the defense of the city's artistic heritage and decorum, as happened in the case of the dispute that prevented the establishment

12 Azzurra Giorgi, "Turismo, il governo impugna la legge regionale toscana", *la Repubblica Firenze*, Mar. 07 (2025), https://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2025/03/07/news/turismo_governo_impugna_legge_regionale_toscana-424049140/.

of a McDonald's fast-food restaurant next to Florence's cathedral. At the same time, the restrictive focus on the traditional hotel industry led to another phenomenon: the explosive development of short-term rental apartments. The limitation of Wild West circumstances in this market already started around 2015–2016 thanks to a contract between the city administration and the main internet providers, so that the overnight tax is no longer evaded but paid automatically when the room is booked. The agreement has become a significant source of income for the municipality and experienced an important progression, amounting today to approximately 80 million euros per year. Nonetheless, the problem became the uncontrolled increase in the number of apartments available for short-term rentals.

The first timid interventions on the matter were followed in 2023–2024 by a restriction of short-term rental availability: a register was set up of already active rental offers, with a subsequent ban on the new ones without any registration in the UNESCO area.¹³ To get round this regulation, just to give an idea of the government's attitude, the incumbent minister of tourism, also an entrepreneur in the tourism sector, sued, but lost in multiple instances.¹⁴ These direct measures were followed by a colorful bouquet of actions for 'urban decorum' which, however, indirectly target short-term rentals. These included the prohibition of key-boxes, which the landlords hung on the road signs outside the apartment doors (a point that we will return to), and the prohibition of alcohol sales in convenience stores from 9 PM to 6 AM. The latter measure greatly curtailed the phenomenon of alcoholic comas that had strongly increased in the previous phase of the booming tourism development after the pandemic. Then, there was an intervention on tour guides who can now only operate with earphones and no longer with loudspeakers, giving some relief to city dwellers. In addition to these measures, a regulation of the circulation of golf-cars, electric scooters, self-balancing monowheels guided tours took place to delimit their proliferation and streamline their appearance.

However, all these measures represent a drop in an ever-swelling ocean. All the measures of the municipal administration are being adopted in the absence of a framework legislation that takes into account the needs of residents in highly touristic cities of art. The introduction of a general ban on short-term rentals, similar to the one that will come into force in Barcelona in 2028–2029, does not appear feasible, as the incumbent Italian government actively opposes its adoption. The right-wing parliament majority is not interested in a regulation of the tourism phenomenon, so as not to undermine the interests of a significant portion of its electorate, which consists of upper classes who live off financial income and often directly off the thriving real-estate income generated by the

13 See <https://www.comune.firenze.it/turismo/locazioni-turistiche-brevi>.

14 Giorgi, "Turismo, il governo impugna la legge regionale toscana."

phenomenon of the diffused hotel scattered throughout the Italian cities of art. The global trends occurring in Florence in an exemplary way are therefore spreading. Hence on the one hand, a phenomenological description must be provided, while on the other, an economic analysis is worthwhile of the backdrop for Florence's overtourism.

2.1 Phenomenology of overtourism in Florence

On the level of phenomenological analysis, the overtourism in Florence is characterized by a very rapid transformation of its appearance due to two main development tendencies: 1. the continuous invention of new 'authentic experiences' to offer to the tourist masses coming into the city, and 2. the regulating interventions of the municipal administration 'protecting decorum' and the artistic heritage to avoid the complete transformation of the city into an entertainment park. Nevertheless, a certain set of 'authentic experiences' have established themselves in the meantime and are now considered standards for a visit to Florence, often replacing the classical museum excursions. The following report relates data from a participant observation that I conducted principally over two periods of time: from January to May 2024 and from January to May 2025. The methodology of the observation follows the 'sociological flânerie method' as, on the one hand, Simmel practiced it with reference to his analysis of the Italian cities of art in contrast to the booming development of the capitalist metropolis of Berlin¹⁵ and, on the other, as it was later tacitly further developed by Bourdieu. To this end, Bourdieu focused his walking research studies on the distribution of cultural capital in Paris, as he related in his memoirs.¹⁶ It is interesting to follow Bourdieu's reasoning on how the sociologist's mind deals with social reality by wearing out the soles of his shoes. He shares this methodological approach in common with Simmel, and he would probably have discussed this at greater length had the German classic, Simmel, not been monopolized in France by the intellectual right. This is a disaster for which French culture today still pays a high price.

There are two specific passages in Bourdieu's autobiography, which 'is not an autobiography' in René Magritte's sense of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*,¹⁷ that illustrate the path that I have also taken to establish the methodology for my variation of a 'strolling sociological aesthetics' in the Simmel–Bourdieu tradition.

Bourdieu reports about his first walking impressions concerning the

15 David Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism. A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Social Theory* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

16 Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-Analyse* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2004), 87f.

17 Didier Eribon, "Sur Bourdieu et l'Esquisse pour une auto-analyse," *Site personnel de Didier Eribon*, 2008, <https://didiereribon.blogspot.com/2008/01/bourdieu-et-lesquisse-pour-une-auto.html>.

Parisian metropolis when he was still a student:

As a young student in preparatory classes, I was in awe of Paris, which brought literary memories to life. I naively identified with Balzac (my astonishing first encounter with his statue at the Vavin cross-roads!), to the point that I often found myself following strangers on my Sunday outings to discover their neighborhood, their house, their surroundings, which I tried to guess.¹⁸

The spontaneous attitude of the young researcher, classifying people and their belonging to particular urban neighborhoods, was later transformed into a more structured approach of the sociological eye:

I had long periods of investigative passion when I was conducting the research that led to *La Distinction* [...]. I spent hours listening to conversations in cafés, on boules pitches, football pitches, in post offices, but also at parties, cocktail receptions and concerts. It was not uncommon for me, unable to resist, to find an excuse to strike up a conversation (it's much easier than you might think) with someone I wanted to get to know better and to investigate, without appearing to do so, a particular issue that interested me.¹⁹

The watching, listening, and chatting approach of the 'strolling sociological eye' is also the one I adopted during my stays of participant observation in the historic center of Florence. However, in doing so I paid particular attention to the aesthetic appearance of the phenomenon of overtourism. Accordingly, collected data is presented in the order of its optical relevance to the strolling observant participant in the city's activities. In turn, the relevance of individual activities is connected to the prominence of their image in the city's landscape as well as to the number of tourists taking part in them. This diverts attention from the traditional focus of tourism studies on airports, stations, queues outside museums, and so on, to the specific novelties offered by the recent overtourism development.

Therefore, I shall start with the most peculiar phenomenon that can be observed in Florence: the invention of traditions. This experience shows to what extent the association of narratives with the sale of products for tourists transforms everyday city life and even the appearance of the historical center. After the pandemic, there appeared so-called 'wine-windows selling points' at different city-center locations. Set into the wall of historical buildings, tourists now find small niches, where they can retrieve their wine glasses or cocktails, which are served from the inside—that is mostly from the nearby café where they would order the same thing served at the counter. However, the niche setting of the glass retrieved from the inside of the building is essential for the obligatory selfie that bears witness to a tourist visit to Florence, 'the city with the wine-windows' (photo 1).

18 Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, 87.

19 *ibid.*, 88.

Thus, the question arises about what the historical backdrop of this ritual is. To be sure, an important number of buildings in Florence have a small wine-window beside the main entrance, where in historical times noble families used to sell bottled wine, as far as they had a wine production in the countryside. Yet, these wine-windows were no longer in use for at least a century. Even speaking with Florentines aged ninety and older, I did not find any witness of this 'tradition.' Yet today it counts as one of the 'musts' for a city-center visit. The question to consider is thus on which path the reinvention of this tradition could take place. In the early days after the pandemic, tourist guides simply stated that the tradition has continually existed since the Middle Ages. The only difference is that in former times you retrieved your bottle of wine through the window, whereas nowadays you will



PHOTO 1

Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 1©

only collect your Aperol Spritz. At some places, even a miniature plaque was added to the wine-window, inviting tourists to knock to get a bottle of wine. Of course, thousands of tourists do so, without getting any answer from the inside and asking passers-by, like me, why no one opens the window. Nonetheless, it is still an experience worth a photo.

Later on, however, tourist guides started to adopt a different version of the story. They admitted that the tradition was interrupted but stated that it was revived during the pandemic, to sell things by avoiding contact among people. This statement, however, also does not correspond to reality, since nobody was allowed to sell anything during the pandemic, unless this was from regularly authorized grocery stores. What is interesting about the statement is nevertheless the remark that there actually was a reprise or a new invention of the tradition. This helps us to reconstruct the empirical backdrop of the phenomenon. The first commentator to speak about the Italian 'wine-windows' was Stanley Tucci in his docu-series about Italy on CNN, arguing that this was a living tradition in Italy. His statement generated among the program's viewers the expectation of experiencing the ritual of getting a drink from the 'wine-window' during their trip to Italy. Where there is demand, there is also supply, as Adam Smith formerly observed. So, tour operators did not hesitate to propose

this experience to their clients. Where historic wine-windows existed in old buildings, Italian entrepreneurs asked to implement a cocktail-bar. And where they did not exist, such windows miraculously appeared overnight next to existing premises—often during the month of August when everyone is on holiday and social control is very loose. *Voilà*, the ready-made! The narrative was there, the economy of valorization could be implemented, and the experience of the event could eventually be enjoyed by millions of tourists who now look at Florentines with a knowing glance as though to say: I am wise to your tradition!

Besides the reinvention of historic traditions, Florence's city center encounters the spectacularizing of existing ones. Traditional Tuscan cuisine is a 'poor kitchen' that has its roots in the sharecrop regulation of agriculture which remained in force until the 1960s. Farmers were forced to surrender half of their harvest to the landowner, so that they lived from a frugal diet based on vegetables, olive oil, bread, and pasta. Meat was only available during feast meals for special occasions such as Christmas, Easter, weddings, and baptisms, and normally consisted of chicken and rabbit dishes. Beef was extremely rare, because cows were means of milk production and oxen were needed to plough the fields. Only in exceptional cases they were slaughtered. However, as mechanization slowly made its way through Italian agriculture after WWII the breeding of particularly robust cattle, such as the Tuscan Chianina variety, lost its relevance and popularity. This is how the new market outlet for Florentine steak was born in the period of the 'economic boom,' when it became a sign of social distinction to be able to put a steak on the table. Today, selling *bistecca alla fiorentina* to tourists represents one of the most important revenue factors for this product. However, what is new is the *spectacularization* of the product that takes place under the auspices of overtourism, so that it became a key visual component of the transformation of the city-center appearance. Exhibitionism of raw meat in restaurant windows in various stages of decomposition did not exist before in Florence. The kitchen was a space of intimacy, and the cuts of steak were only displayed at the customer's table when the steak was ordered. At the same time, meanwhile, believing that the best way to attract the customer is to unveil without any conception about the dialectic of concealment, the public space of the city center has been populated with quarter oxen on display on the sidewalks. Here, the logic of unconditional hard-core show has prevailed (see photo 2, 3).

A further interesting phenomenon of overtourism is the need for re-materialization of the travel experiences beyond the millions of selfies that are constantly being taken. The latter phenomenon would merit a separate study, especially concerning museums visits. Artworks were usually enjoyed by looking ahead to immerse oneself in their atmosphere, which helped to escape from everyday reality through aesthetic perception, and thus contributing to the critical reflectiveness of culture. Today,



PHOTO 2.3

Gregor Fitz: Participant observation photo 2, 3©

instead, this possibility is denied *a priori*, since museum visits take place with backs turned, so that the narcissism of selfies intrudes between the observer and the work of art. Now we know why the smile of Mona Lisa is so mysterious. At some point, however, the complete dematerialization and narcissistic immanence of today's iconic universes is no longer enough for the exhausted psyche of our contemporaries. The memory of authentic travel experiences demands to be rematerialized. The booming market of fridge-magnets, baseball caps, and t-shirts of improbable universities testifies to this. The interesting phenomenon in Florence is the second life of the photo booth. Since the introduction of biometric passports, traditional identity photos are no longer valuable. The majority of Florence's photo booths were dismantled. Yet, the one that was placed in the district of San Frediano survived in the wake of the neighborhood being elected in 2023 to the title of the 'coolest neighborhood in the world' featured in the Lonely Planet guide.²⁰ Ever since, the district, which was previously a recovery haven of Florentines away from the tourist tsunami in the quadrilateral area between the cathedral and the Uffizi, has completely turned upside down. The proximity of small local shops has disappeared, being substituted by streets full of restaurants and fast-food outlets. However, the photo booth got a new life and became a crucial

20 Edoardo Semmola, "Firenze, la Lonely Planet è certa: 'San Frediano più cool di NY'" *Corriere fiorentino*, Aug. 26 (2017), <https://corrierefiorentino.corriere.it/firenze/notizie/cronaca/17-agosto-26/firenze-lonely-planet-certa-san-frediano-piu-cool-ny-bb68bd72-8a5b-11e7-9a9b-61aa855bd802.shtml>.



PHOTO 4.5

Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 4, 5©

motor for the re-materialization of rituals of the journey to Florence. Here is proof that you have really been there—even if the result is not always at the height of expectations (see photo 4, 5).

A further transformation, which catches the attention of the sociological *flâneur*, is the transformation of historical venues in the city into tourists' entertainment hubs. The phenomenon can be measured on a scale of steps, ranging from the adaptation of local places to fit the presumed tourist's expectations, to the complete annihilation of traditional places of 'authentic Florentine experience.' A typical example of the last type is the end of the Café Gambrinus–Halle complex. This was a historical café and cinema near the most central Repubblica square—as the name is still carved on the building façade. Originally, this was a café–restaurant with a winter–garden and roof terrace inaugurated in 1894 and located beneath the other historical literary-café, like the Giubbe Rosse or the Gilli, where the Italian artistic avant-gardes met. In his novel *Il salto vitale* Ardengo Soffici, a representative of second futurism, gave a vibrant description of city life that occurred in the halls of the Gambrinus.²¹ After WWII the ground floor was readapted to one of Florence's largest cinemas, leaving the original bar at the entrance intact. A further particularity of the site was the huge cellar where one of the city's most prestigious billiard halls was located. Nonetheless, since 2007 all this has had to give way to the Florentine seat of the Hard Rock Café.

21 See Ardengo Soffici, *Il salto vitale. Autoritratto d'artista italiano nel quadro del suo tempo*. Vol. 3. Giovinezza (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1954).

An example of the partial transformation of historical venues into 'tourists' entertainment hubs' is, on the contrary, the Café Rivoire in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence's city hall. The café, like the other historical venues in the city center, was characterized by its linear and to some extent severe style comparable to their model of Vienna's café houses. Pictures of the Florentine avant-garde of the 1950s hung on the wall. However, also here when the historical ownership gave up in 2020 there was a stylistic break and an adaptation to the current standards of mass tourism. To improve the productivity of the location a kitchen has been added so that lunches and dinners can be served on the café terrace. The interior design was aligned to the other cafés of the same chain. Now the café premises are full of late Baroque Madonna paintings as they are found in some churches. The tables and historical seats have been replaced by pink armchairs whose color tone is also echoed in the ceiling decorations. The arrangement is accompanied by a stuffed neck of a giraffe that towers in the center of the room (**photo 6**).



PHOTO 6

Gregor Fitz: Participant observation photo 6©

Furthermore, there are a number of other places that were reconverted to hubs of tourist experiences. An example is pastry laboratories. Courses for tourists to learn about the preparation of 'traditional Florentine recipes' have already existed for decades. However, the novelty strikes quite a different note. What is peculiar is the spectacularization of these experiences, so that they take place in a way that must be visible for everybody. A café in the heart of the old town that specialized in the offer of *bomboloni*, the traditional Florentine donuts, has for example been converted into an open-air confectioner laboratory, where tourists can watch and take knowing part in preparing the most authentic Florentine cakes. By doing this, they must be visible from the street. Not only because this is advertisement for the organizers, but also because the experience is only considered authentic, if exposed to the 'panopticon of overtourism' that adds to it a particular symbolic surplus value (**see photo 7**).

The feeling of native Florentines of being expropriated from the familiar places of everyday life continues when they go to the few still existing small local shops. At the same time, another presentation is happening with tasting experiences. Therefore, no grocery shopping. The most macroscopic evidence of this space occupation is given by the reality of the diffused eatery that the city center has been transformed into. Not only the first floor of the central market, the *Mercato Centrale*, has been turned into a huge eating refectory for tourists. Traditional as well as newly invented



PHOTO 7

Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 7©

restaurants are overbooked and surrounded by endless queues of customers waiting for their eating experience at half-hourly intervals. This is the absolute opposite of the Italian convivial tradition. The city center thus appears to be full of queues, so that some compassionate landlords have provided chairs for the waiting people (photo 8, 9).

The most tenacious queues are to be found outside the selfie sandwich store, which became an absolute must for every visit to Florence. The owners had to hire a security service to bring order to the queues lining up before, by now, the multiple stores and completely blocking the narrow city center street, even at night (photo 10).

This is the most exemplary story of Florence's overtourism. A simple wine and sandwich store, where every Florentine had once visited while playing



PHOTO 8-9

Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 8, 9©



hooky from school, became overnight a global hit as the owner's son posted a photo on social media with the slogan: 'I am eating the best sandwich in the world.' The post went viral. Everyone wanted to have a selfie with that same sandwich to claim to have been in Florence. Meanwhile, the sandwich store became a global franchising trademark and can be found everywhere, even in Las Vegas. A less visible side of the global eatery phenomenon can yet be accessed on the 'experience pages' of the major internet booking platforms: the 'authentic dinner and cooking together with the resident'—and on request, with supplementary conversation in Italian. Florentine families have thus discovered a new business model to supplement their monthly income in the face of salaries that are frozen at the level of 25 years ago and present to visitors a stylized version of what tourists expect to be Italian private life.



PHOTO 10

Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 10©

The most impactful side of the urban transformation in Florence's city center, however, is not the diffused eatery, but the diffused hotel. This phenomenon has a perceptive side, on which I will first focus. In other words, this involves the pervasive presence of hundreds of people dragging trolleys and producing a typical noise on the irregular historic stone streets and sidewalks. There is a multiplication of keypad-door-bells, which in contrast to Paris never existed in the Florentine urban landscape. Then, there is the creative hanging of key-boxes on window grills, on bicycle racks, even on road signs (photo 11, 12).

The residents of the buildings were horrified. Anyone could break into the key boxes and take the front door keys. However, in the end, the municipal administration succeeded in banning them for the usual reasons of decorum. All these appearances are a sign of the automatization experienced by the short-term rentals business. Gone are the days of the romantic advertising idea: namely, the penniless artist rents out space in his atelier to passing tourists, one of whom would surely become his muse. Instead, we face a veritable industrialization of real estate rental income. The owners of the apartments rent them out to agencies that handle customer relations, administration and cleaning, by employing low-cost immigrant labor. Tourists often do not meet anyone; they open the door by calling a phone number and only have email contact with the management agency. The income is maximized, with the least expenditure of economic and human resources in a property market that produces an enormous



PHOTO 11

Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 11, 12©

speculative bubble. Behind the phenomenological appearance of the scattered hotels that characterize overtourism in Florence, there lies the substance of financial speculation that drives it.

2.2 The economic backdrop of overtourism in Florence

Since the rise of the online booking sites, local middle-classes started to rent their inherited grandma-flats to the incoming tourists. Nonetheless, real-estate speculation rapidly began to dominate the market. This is best illustrated by sites that recommend yield-optimized real-estate investment across the world.²² The opening statement of the site is revealing. Asking the question from the viewpoint of the real-estate investor: how is Florence performing in 2025? The answer is unequivocal: great! With a 95% score composed on the basis of overwhelming positive development in: rental demand 88%; revenue growth 59%; seasonality 64%; and regulation 70%. For the currently 17,360 short-term rentals in Florence, with an increment of +3% on the past year, the yield data are: annual revenue \$28,000, +3%. Occupancy rate: 62% +4%. Average daily rate: \$215.4 +3%. Revenue per available rental: \$130.4 +6%. The typical rental type in Florence is: entire home (85%). Private room (14%) and none-shared room. The annual availability is 1–90 nights (25%). 91–180 nights (20%). 181–270 nights (17%) and 271–365 nights (38%).

²² See <https://www.airdna.co/vacation-rental-data/app/it/toscana/florence/overview>.

The minimum stay of tourists is: 1 night (0.7%). 2 nights (43.0%). 3 nights (15.8%). 4–6 nights (5.3%). 7–29 nights (1.4%). Adding to this there is the growing group (33.8%), of mostly study-abroad students, which stays 30+ nights. Furthermore, there is a number of 5 major property managers who each administrate between 250 and 100 apartments.

All these data speak the language of a substantial industrialization of financial investment in real estate in Florence. Buildings inside the UNESCO area transform into financial capital valorization machines and long-term rentals for city dwellers disappear from the market, promoting the final expulsion of the non-property-owning population from the city center. A secondary effect of this centrifugal trend is that real estate prices are rising in a radius of 30 km around the city center, also making it difficult to settle in the suburbs. The most prominent consequence of this development is the issue with school and high-school teachers. 'Winning' a permanent position as a teacher in a public-school contest is a rare stroke of good fortune in Italy, often representing the conclusion of a long and precarious working career. In normal conditions, nobody would refuse this opportunity. However, in Florence this happens more and more often, because teachers do not find flats to rent and cannot afford to buy property on Florentine conditions due to their meagre Italian wages. The outcome: Florence's education system suffers from a permanent shortage of teachers.

Florence is no longer a place to live, but the city has been transformed into an open-air factory for the production of financial income. The size of the factory can be reconstructed thanks to a graphic representation of the location of short-term rentals density (**Chart 1**).

This raises the matter of what could be a way out of the current development trend. In Italy, legislative intervention is only possible at the national level. In order to have a chance of success, such intervention would have to consider the interests of the Italian leisure class, which holds a large part of Italian real-estate assets. Currently, long-term tenancies can turn into social cases, sometimes with tenants who do not pay, but cannot be evicted from their accommodation. Accordingly, the owners of the approximately 10 million unrented apartments, more than 27% of the dwellings in Italy,²³ are deeply reluctant to let their properties for long-term rent. Short-term rentals, whose taxation is very low, are thus an attractive alternative. New legislation should at the same time provide for higher taxation of short-term rentals and draconian measures for breaking longer tenancies, especially in the case of defaulting tenants. A non-speculative housing market could thus be reborn, allowing the repopulation of city centers with families with children. Adopting such legislation, however,

23 Istat, "Quasi un'abitazione su tre non è occupata. Più della metà costruita nella seconda metà dello scorso secolo," *istat*, 01 Aug. (2024), https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Today-Abitazioni_01_08-2024.pdf.

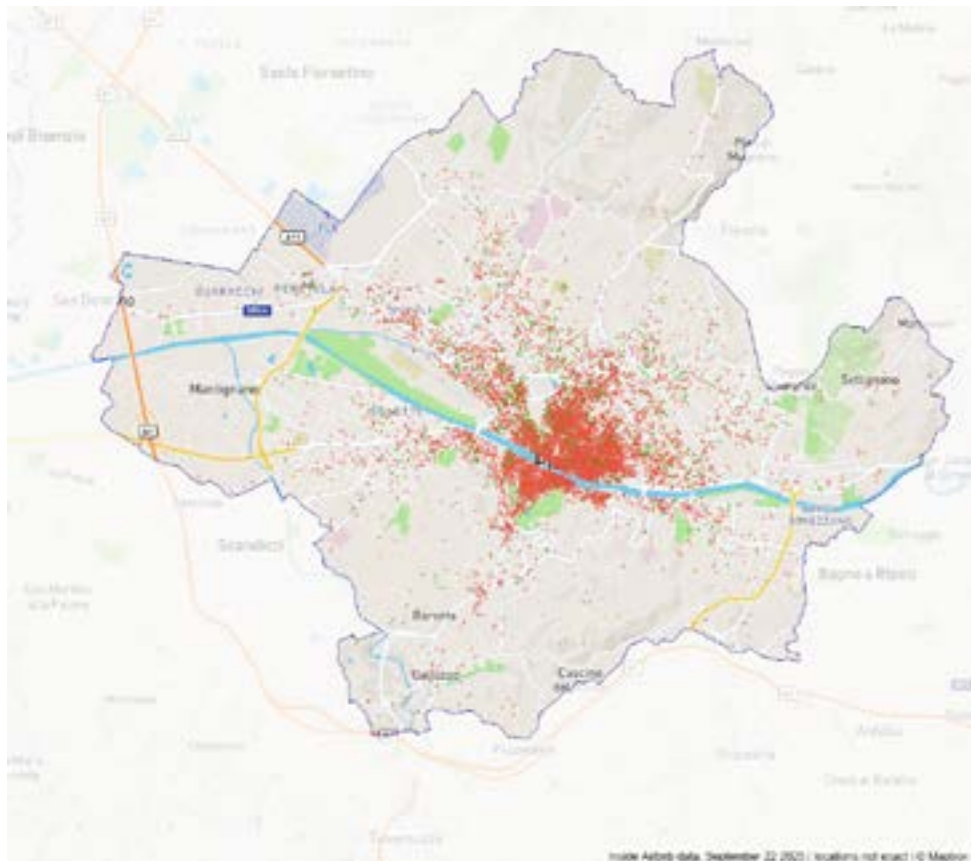


CHART 1

<https://insideairbnb.com/florence/>

requires governments with great courage, as it would displease two very influential groups of voters at the same time. Therefore, in all likelihood these measures will not be taken, leaving Florence to follow the fate of Venice toward the complete transformation of the historic city center into a site for the production of the current emerging form of capital appreciation intertwined with the booming tourist industry. This calls into question the logic that the development trend follows.

3. The logic of Disneylandization

A consistent proportion of the living cultural heritage is being lost, and along with it also everyday cultural practices that constituted one of the main attractions of Italian cities of art. To better understand what the transformation of Florence's city center into an entertainment park means, it is therefore necessary to conduct a comparative analysis between the current phenomenology that my observant participation established and the research in aesthetic sociology that Simmel conducted at the beginning of the 20th century. For Simmel, the Italian art cities constituted an existential antithesis to the rapid adaptation of life to the needs of the commodity-producing liberal capitalism of the early 20th century in Berlin's megalopolis. The comparison with Florence's city center appearance a hundred years ago reveals the analytical elements of a diagnosis that makes it possible to integrate the paradigm of enrichment capitalism

to describe the special nature of the development model that today prevails in Italian art cities. This is possible because the phenomena we are observing empirically today in Florence are not incipient, but rather a trend that began during Mayor Matteo Renzi's administration of the city (2009–2014) and then grew stronger until it completely escaped the control of the subsequent administrations led by Mayor Dario Nardella (2014–2024).

Simmel published his essay on Florence after spending his holidays there—mostly in June—several times in the early years of the last century.²⁴ His Florence essay (1906),²⁵ together with those on Rome (1898)²⁶ and Venice (1907),²⁷ constitutes the theoretical counterpart to the analysis on modern urbanization in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903).²⁸ The metropolis constitutes the precipitate of modern social transformation. It is characterized by the multiplication of ephemeral, casual and short-lived social contacts. If the urbanite were to make himself available to all these social exchanges with the same willingness adopted in the relationships of the intimate sphere, he would face a complete exhaustion of his psychic energies. Thus, where sufficient physical distance from one's contemporaries is no longer available, modalities of interaction develop that increase social distance. Reserve, cold politeness, tact, reading newspapers, books, or now cell phones on public transport serve as regulators of urban interaction. It is a form of coexistence that accelerates and fragments the pace of life, imposing more and more forms of mediation to fluidify social interaction. Money thus increasingly becomes the crucial institution of modernity. It anonymizes relationships and creates social distance where the spatiotemporal meshes of society become ever more compressed. Due to its ambiguity, the metropolitan aseptic machinery of interaction exerts a strong attraction on the urbanite. It has at its disposal all the suggestions of an intense, pulsating, and sexy life, which, however, can quickly turn into neurasthenia.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Italian art cities in Simmel's perception are located at the opposite end of mental life. Here, urban aesthetic perception is not confronted with a totalizing mechanism that reduces everything to fragmentation and monetarization. Especially in Florence, a sense of harmony prevails in the form of a wise balance between nature and culture.²⁹ The city's heritage of architectural and artistic monuments

24 Gregor Fitzi, "Florenz in der ästhetischen Anschauung von Georg Simmel," *Simmel Newsletter* 5, no. 1 (1995): 34–45.

25 Georg Simmel, "Florence" (1906), trans. by Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007), 38–41.

26 Georg Simmel, "Rome" (1898), trans. by Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007), 30–37.

27 Georg Simmel, "Venice" (1907), trans. by Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007), 42–46.

28 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), trans. by Kurt H. Wolff, in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 409–424.

29 Simmel, "Florence."

appears as a total artwork created by human culture that perfectly fits into the natural frame of its hills. These in turn do not speak the language of wild nature divorced from human intervention. Quite the contrary: cultivated nature expresses all the gracefulness of human care. Olive groves and vineyards redraw the contours of the hills, giving them an expression of complete harmony, which Simmel claims can be best experienced from the Basilica of San Miniato al Monte. This is a view, as it was for example painted by the Anglo-American painter Thomas Cole, in 1837, that inspires modern humanity with a utopian perception of a social reality capable of overcoming the life fragmentation typical for the metropolis of modern manufacturing capitalism. Simmel's diagnosis in urban sociological aesthetics thus culminates in the attribution of the status of the last escape from modern neurasthenia to the city of Florence. This strongly contrasts with the results of today's participatory observation constituting the starting point for the concluding remarks on overtourism's impact. The monuments, the landscape and the city are still there, yet they now appear as ruins of what they once were. Their fundamental otherness is obscured by their role as a mere backdrop to the tourism industry.

Before setting off on their trip, today's tourists are bombarded with endless suggestions on websites, directing their visit to Florence to completely different sets of experiences than at the beginning of the 20th century. The proposal of 'authenticity' claims to take tourists out of their bubble. However, these expectations are illusory: they are a fictitious reworking of what tourists' ideas about their destination are imagined to be. The invention of authenticity as imagined expectation of the other is therefore a crucial aspect of the anthropological transformation produced by overtourism in the face of cities that are gradually being emptied of real life, destroying daily practices and expelling their inhabitants. The aesthetic perception that the city of Florence produces is no longer one of harmony between nature and culture. Instead, it takes the form of a rapid, if not convulsive succession of commercialized experiences, pretending to be authentic. The visitor therefore no longer has the possibility of finding himself in a reality that is different from his everyday life in terms of life rhythm and cultural content. The city of art does not function any more as an escape point from the alienation of the modern metropolis and becomes a production site for a new capitalist development model.

Today Florence is the city of selfie sandwiches, the wine-windows, the never-ending queues, the diffused eatery, and the diffused hotel. It is a stressful and boring place from which one wants to escape as soon as possible, hoping to relax again at home on the sofa. It has become an entertainment park tailored to the supposed expectations of tourists and takes on the profile of an 'event-city,' sharing together with Venice the fate of the great US entertainment centers. Take, for example, Disneyland or Disney World. These had first sprung up outside urban centers, on the initiative of cultural industry majors, or as money-laundering centers of

the Italian American mafia, such as Las Vegas. However, their logic later extended to existing urban centers. A typical example is the city of Orlando near Disney World.³⁰ Here, numerous entrepreneurs developed low-cost entertainment parks, promising breathtaking experiences in order to divert at least part of the tourist flow directed towards the historic amusement park.³¹ The logic of 'inventing entertainment' thus began to take hold of the tourism industry, extending after the pandemic to the classic art cities, mainly through tour operators and online booking sites. This development model for the tourism industry, currently one of the fastest growing sectors of the global economy,³² is well suited to maximize returns on financial capital investment in real estate. This synergy gave rise to the business model that we see operating in Florence. To compete with other forms of investment, real estate must be able to exponentially increase its returns. Long-term real estate is not able to secure this, whereas short-term rentals have proven to be capable of doing so. However, this is only possible if tourist numbers in historic city's centers continue to increase, thereby also increasing property values. This is why the two business models of speculative property investment and the transformation of mass tourism sites into entertainment parks have married so happily, leading to the Disneylandization of Italian art cities. Venice has already gone a long way along this road, fulfilling Simmel's prophecy of a dead city reduced to a theatrical backdrop for major media events. Florence is following closely behind and becoming a production site for the old-world capitalism that has lost its manufacturing vocation. Thus, Italian cities of art have been transformed from a place of revival from metropolitan neurasthenia into the new frontier of the joint venture between entertainment-industry capitalism and real estate financial speculation.

30 Rebecca Williams, *Theme Park Fandom. Spatial Transmedia, Materiality and Participatory Cultures* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2020).

31 Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*.

32 See <https://wtcc.org/news/global-travel-and-tourism-is-strong-despite-economic-headwinds>.

Gregor Fitzi is Senior Researcher at European University Viadrina, Frankfurt Oder , and Associated Researcher at the Centre Georg Simmel, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. He earned his PhD in Sociology from the University of Bielefeld and has held academic positions at the University of Heidelberg and the University of Potsdam. His research centers on sociological theory, modernity, citizenship, and classical social thought. Major publications include *Normative Intermittency. A Sociology of Failing Social Structuration* (Palgrave, 2022), *The Challenge of Modernity. Simmel's Sociological Theory* (Routledge, 2019), and several edited volumes on Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, populism, and urban change.

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PRACTICES

Environmental challenges and responsive public spaces: mitigation technologies against climate change and extreme climate events

Lidia Errante — Dipartimento di Architettura e Design (dAeD), Università degli Studi "Mediterranea" di Reggio Calabria
Contact: lidia.errante@unirc.it

ABSTRACT

The concept of urbanity refers to urban life and the behaviors, values, and features — social, cultural, and aesthetic — acknowledged by the communities that live in the city and that today also have to confront the climate crisis. The contribution explores the impact of extreme weather phenomena — heat waves, heat island effect, water bombs — on the city and public spaces, analyzing adaptation strategies including Nature-Based Solutions (NBS). Such strategies are discussed according to their role in enhancing Ecosystem Services, improving the quality of the environment and the well-being of citizens. Such technologies, integrated into broader strategies and urban-scaled interventions, are central to strengthening cities' resilience, positively influencing perceptions of safety and environmental comfort contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive urban ecosystem.

KEYWORDS

Public Space; Environmental Crisis; Urban Resilience; Extreme Climatic Events; Nature-based Solutions.

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The worsening environmental and climate crisis and the chase to achieve sustainability goals have radically changed attitudes toward urban regeneration, oriented toward a trans-scalar, holistic, and metabolic approach to redefining the balance between the natural and anthropogenic spheres. This unprecedented perspective has also highlighted the fragility of urban systems and their ability to ensure — through spaces, services, and functions — a certain degree of well-being for the communities. The phenomena affecting the city today have a multidimensional scale characterized by a high degree of interrelation between the social, environmental, and economic spheres.



FIG. 1

Bosco Verticale, Via Gaetano de Castillia, Milan, Metropolitan City of Milan, Italy. Picture by Zach Rowlandson on Unsplash.

The very concept of urban landscape emphasizes the need to identify the ecosystem of elements (artificial and natural) that inhabit it and their dynamics of coexistence, formation, reproduction, and transformation. Today, humans and the environment are experiencing strong tensions due to the intensive exploitation of the planet's resources and the need to adapt to extreme and adverse climatic conditions and weather events. The latter are increasingly frequent and intense, leading to dramatic impacts and damages on infrastructure, cities, and populations. The contribution reflects, indeed, on the ability of design, new technologies, and urban transformation strategies to provide adequate tools for mitigation, safety, and security.

Based on these premises, the paper discusses how the negative impacts of the climate crisis and environmental challenges have repercussions



FIG. 2

Picture by Matt Palmer on Unsplash.

on the built environment, the infrastructures, the natural environment, the quality of urban life, and the perceived well-being of communities.

In particular, the paper examines the effects of three extreme climate events - Heat Island Effect, Heat Wave, and Water Bomb - which are among the most frequent and impactful. These also appear to be triggered by similar micro-climate conditions. Holistic, cross-cutting, and trans-scalar environmental mitigation strategies are then discussed, with their outcomes in communities' perceptions of their urban landscape. Thus, reference is also made to the ability of said strategies to produce a benefit in strengthening Ecosystem Services (Provision, Regulation, Support, and Cultural).

According to Sergio Los¹ Sustainable architecture and strategies have led to an 'epistemological turn' where 'instrumental acting' and 'communicative acting' synergy accompanies the cultural evolution of man in the conscious process of transformation and adaptation of the environment through technique. In the present times, which Los would have called inter-somatic – or Anthropocene – the environment has been overwhelmed by man-made transformations and technology.

The objective of the paper is to identify, among the many strategies for urban regeneration and sustainable recovery, practices and solutions that ensure adequate environmental comfort², appropriate energy alternatives³, and symbolic relationships⁴.

1 Sergio Los, *Geografia dell'architettura. Progettazione bioclimatica e disegno architettonico* (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2013).

2 Alessandro Rogora e Valentina Dessì (cur.), *Il comfort ambientale negli spazi aperti* (Monfalcone: Edicom, 2005).

3 Yona Friedman, *Alternatives énergétiques, plaidoyer pour une autosuffisance locale* (Paris: Dangles, 2011).

4 Los, *Geografia dell'architettura*.

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2. Human-nature balance in a broader perspective

Cities, their spaces, infrastructures, and human and non-human actors are the most complex products of society, the sum, the coexistence, and the interpenetration of multiple spheres in perilous balance. The social sphere and the goal of well-being are the reasons for technological and scientific progress. On the other hand, these are among the causes of the unsustainability of our lifestyles, social injustice, and inequality. Added to this complex discourse, the extreme climatic events and the negative impacts of the environmental crisis are changing how we experience cities. This happens in diverse contexts and ways, with different degrees of awareness of the population. For example, it can be observed how rising temperatures prevent people from experiencing open public spaces, preferring confined, air-conditioned places, or the inconveniences that many cities incur during brief but heavy rainfall. Today, the communities recognize that global environmental challenges have severe repercussions on our behavioral patterns and vice-versa. Our unsustainable consumption patterns, ranging from fossil-fuel energy to waste management and pollution, can worsen the side effects of the environmental crisis, first locally and then globally. Such awareness modifies the use and perception of our living spaces: dwellings, neighborhoods, public and private spaces⁵.

The discussion of sustainability — physical, social, and environmental — finds a wide field of experimentation in the city, which always has different cultural and socioeconomic conditions that help determine the success or failure of urban transformation and regeneration strategies. The outcome of these strategies cannot be evaluated only in terms of the performance requirements and performance of technological solutions but also to bring a benefit to the entire urban ecosystem.

⁵ Alberto De Capua, and Lidia Errante, “INA-Casa a Reggio Calabria. Innovazioni socio-tecniche per il quartiere di Sbarre,” in *Storie di quartieri pubblici. Progetti e sperimentazioni per valorizzare l’abitare*, a cura di Anna Delera ed Elisabetta Ginelli (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2022), 202–211.



FIG. 3

Rotterdam cityscape. Picture by the author.

According to the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana⁶, urban ecosystems can be defined as those areas where the presence of grey, green, and blue infrastructures or with a high population density, also encompassing

⁶ Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, "Glossary: Nature-Based Solutions. Urban Agenda For The EU," (2021). https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/images/NBS/Urban_Agenda_for_the_EU_-_ENGLISH-4_1.pdf

urban and peri-urban areas, including parks, cemeteries, gardens, backyards, building lots, urban forests, individual tree specimens, green roofs, wetlands, rivers, canals, streams, lakes, and ponds. Those ecosystems provide benefits and services related to and directly benefiting urban areas.

The previous definition describes the urban and built environment as the presence of the many infrastructures humans use to enjoy that environment and, by extension, the flows of people, goods, and services that pass through them. Observing the city from an ecosystem perspective makes it possible to identify more or less extensive portions that are functionally independent as they are complex and diverse. It refers to the infrastructure of public space: it physically holds together the system of private and public, collective and individual mobility, and defines spaces for sociality, recreation, and commerce. Also, it regulates flows and behaviors in space through precise configurations that contribute, to different extents, to the quality of life of communities and the urban environment⁷. The urban environment can be considered a unicum composed of different sets of objects and subjects in dynamic balance whose relationships generate a performance requirement that sustainability strategies must consider.

A sustainable regeneration strategy has to secure, create, or reinforce the ecosystem services provided by such an urban environment, defined by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment⁸ as ‘the multiple benefits from ecosystems to humankind’ as life-support, provisioning, regulating, and cultural services. On the one hand, the first three refer specifically to environmental quality conditions of the ecosystem, natural or urban, referring to nutrient cycles, water accessibility, or biodiversity reproduction. On the other hand, Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES) represent those recreational opportunities and experiences enjoyable by natural elements. CESs represent, along with Regulatory Services, the most important categories for the sustainability of an urban ecosystem, as they provide benefits in terms of environmental — microclimate and pollution reduction, water cycle, pollination — and social quality⁹.

From this perspective, ESs ensure the conditions for the urban environment’s sustainability and livability, with fallout on social, environmental, and economic dimensions. Urban regeneration processes, while opposing urban decay and land consumption, have not always been able to trigger sustainable development processes and long-term benefits.

From a broader perspective, the issue of sustainable development and the protection of Ecosystem Services is relevant to the quality of urban

7 Alberto De Capua, and Lidia Errante, “Interpretare lo spazio pubblico come medium dell’abitare urbano | Interpreting Public Space as a Medium for Urban Liveability.” *Agathón* 6 (2019): 148–161.

8 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: A Report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (Washington: Island, 2005).

9 Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, “Glossary.”

living and the perception of well-being. According to Santolini¹⁰, a good provision of ESs increases the per capita wealth of natural capital, positively influencing its health and vulnerability. ESs, in this sense, can be correlated to natural commons, as these are of free use to the population but not yet quantified or properly esteemed for their economic value. On the contrary, it is observed that insurance policies are increasingly available to cover assets, buildings, and people against environmental hazards.

3. The impact of extreme climate events for cities and public spaces

Recently, the Mediterranean has experienced faster warming than the global average. Summer temperatures have increased, impacting water resources, agriculture, and human health. Heat waves have become more intense, endangering the safety of people, especially children, the elderly, and people with health problems¹¹. On top of that, the increase in the intensity and frequency of rainfall and water bombs results in further aggravation of ecosystem conditions and severe damage to green and blue infrastructure.

The ESs erosion discourse is not limited to the ability of ecosystems to ease the impact of extreme climate events and mitigate them but also to the risk of triggering them and negatively impacting the social sphere of sustainability.

The contribution examines three extreme climate events that are the subject of the previously mentioned research: urban heat islands (UHIs), heat waves (HWs), and water bombs.

These three phenomena impact cities and the use of public spaces, including related urban services. They can be mitigated through specific adjustments and expedients involving micro-climate, urban morphology, the use of materials, and the multifactorial combination of some specific trigger conditions described below.

Urban Heat Island (UHI) occurs when the temperatures in urbanized areas are higher than in rural areas. During warmer seasons, this effect can lead to thermal discomfort, increased energy consumption, and aggravated pollution¹². This phenomenon has a greater incidence and severity in highly urbanized settings, i.e., where the anthropogenic process of altering material surfaces results in extensive vegetation suppression, albedo variation, and general soil sealing. Specifically, the factors involved in the

10 Riccardo Santolini, "Servizi Ecosistemici e Sostenibilità," *Ecoscienza* 3 (2010): 20-23.

11 Riccardo Alberti, "Impatto dei cambiamenti climatici nel Mediterraneo," *INGV Ambiente*, 2023, <https://ingvambiente.com/2023/07/04/il-cambiamento-climatico-nel-mediterraneo/>.

12 Cátia Rodrigues de Almeida, Ana Cláudia Teodoro, and Artur Gonçalves, "Study of the Urban Heat Island (UHI) Using Remote Sensing Data/Techniques: A Systematic Review," *Environments* 8, no. 105 (2021).



FIG. 4

Urban landscape affected by heat and smog. Picture by Marek Piwnicki on Unsplash.

formation of the UHI are related to the ability of building materials to store heat; anthropogenic heat production and, in general, processes, systems, and infrastructure that contribute to the increase in average temperatures; the alteration and minimization of wind speed as a function of surface roughness; and the increased absorption of solar radiation by surfaces with lower albedo.

Factors that the UHI is capable of influencing include¹³:

- Local micro-climate;
- Local energy balance;
- Perceived thermal discomfort;
- Absorption of electromagnetic energy;
- Cooling of surfaces compared to planted surfaces;
- Increase in surface temperatures and reduction in relative humidity and latent heat;
- Intensification of sensible heat;
- The hydrogeological behavior of ecosystems;
- Public health.

The second phenomenon examined is the Heat Wave (HW), which is determined when very high temperatures are recorded for several consecutive days, with high humidity rates, high solar radiation, and scarce ventilation. It is defined considering the climatic conditions of a specific city or area, and no universal temperature threshold value can be identified to assess

13 *ibid.*

its magnitude. According to Kong et alii.¹⁴, this phenomenon affects rural and urban areas equally severely with specific interactions with UHI.

Specifically, the causes of HW refer to:

- The reflectance and heat absorption properties of natural and artificial surfaces;
- The use of impermeable materials that reduce evapotranspiration and latent heat flux with alterations in urban atmospheric temperatures;
- Urban morphology in the vertical direction, which increases the canyon effect;
- CO₂ emissions, which prolongs the effect over time.



FIG. 5

Urban flood. Picture by Mika Baumeister on Unsplash.

Briefly, HW occurs when there are very high temperatures for several consecutive days, with high humidity rates, high solar radiation, and the absence of ventilation. It is defined concerning the climatic conditions of a specific city or area, and no universal temperature-threshold value can be identified to assess its magnitude.

The last climate event examined is the water bomb. The most pertinent definition is Explosive Cyclogenesis, characterized by a rapid increase in the low-pressure area of an extratropical cyclone with strong winds and precipitation. The magnitude is classified according to latitude, which

determines a specific threshold value for the effect of low pressure. The main impact of this phenomenon is connected to the absorption capacity of the soil. When the surfaces are impermeable or dry, flooding or sliding may occur involving the detachment of loose material such as mud and debris. The most frequent damage associated with this climatic event is flooding, which is severe in both rural and urban environments, often tragically associated with human loss.

Thus, climate change is not exclusively an environmental issue but has severe social, political, and economic equity implications. The impacts of extreme weather events, as a consequence of a much broader and worrying environmental imbalance, are increasingly severe on the most vulnerable communities, biodiversity, and the ability to produce food, generating a sense of uncertainty that affects the poorest segments of the population.

To address the effects of climate change, mitigation and adaptation strategies are essential. This includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions by adopting sustainable energy policies and promoting renewable energy. In addition, adaptation measures that improve water resource management, urban planning, coastal ecosystem protection, and climate-resilient agriculture¹⁵ must be implemented.

However, these strategies have timeframes and modes of operation that require substantial effort and investment. While plans and projects are developed, often following bureaucratic processes that depend on the policy ideas of different national governments, several solutions are more targeted and applicable at the scale of public space through urban design.

4. Environmental strategies and challenges at the urban scale

The design opportunities related to the ecological transition and the regeneration of the built and urban environment, infrastructures, and spaces reconsider villages, cities, buildings, and homes according to environmental quality criteria. Among the others, the contribution acknowledges:

- The correct planning of the intervention, taking into account its impact on the social, economic, and environmental spheres;
- The circular process of execution and production of the work;
- The flexibility and transversality of ecological and social functions;
- The improvement of the environmental quality of the built environment and the quality of life of communities;
- The regeneration of social commons.

In this sense, villages and contemporary cities have the same need to reconstitute an adequate physical and social infrastructure, made up of

¹⁵ Riccardo, "Impatto dei cambiamenti climatici nel Mediterraneo."



FIG. 6

Detail of a green facade. Picture by Lili Banse on Unsplash.

a mobility network and aggregation spaces that can also be configured as environmental protection devices, off-grid energy production, containment of the heat island effect and absorption of harmful emissions. In particular, design and technological opportunities in the built environment can revolve around public space infrastructure and urban ecosystem services. For example:

- Extend the green areas, planting tree species to absorb harmful substances and emissions from urban mobility. Mitigation strategies for the effect of increased vegetation area include the application of green roofs and increased green spaces (urban and rural) such as parks and grasslands¹⁶;
- Transforming boulevards into green corridors and increasing the vegetation cover help change the surface energy balance by increasing latent heat flux through evapotranspiration compared to sensible heat flux according to a given net radiation. That is, finding a reduction in surface and air temperatures and solar radiation transmitted to the subsurface near the vegetation surface;
- Increasing soil permeability through new areas of technological green areas able to interact positively with the sewerage network infrastructure;
- Integrate areas dedicated to the production of energy from renewable sources such as photovoltaic or kinetic surfaces, which can be used to supply public lighting or charging stations;
- In places affected by flooding from heavy rain, identify suitable spots for temporary water harvesting following the model of water squares;
- Redefine the hierarchy of urban mobility routes by providing

16 Jian Kong, et al., "Urban Heat Island and Its Interaction with Heatwaves: A Review of Studies on Mesoscale," *Sustainability* 13, no. 10923 (2021).

adequate space for sustainable individual transport and related service infrastructure (such as e-bikes, e-scooters, etc.);

- Improving urban accessibility, with a focus on housing estates and public buildings and the definition of guided routes to essential services;
- Increasing albedo to reduce heat absorption by surfaces, i.e., to enhance the reflectance of urban surfaces and buildings preferring clearer or white surfaces and to reduce the energy consumption of buildings and cooling due to a general reduction in urban ambient temperature, heat accumulation in roofs, and anthropogenic heat in urban areas. These measures do not compensate for the effects of HW that can occur even in the presence of clouds that allow more solar radiation. The increase in albedo also partly reduces the air velocity and buoyancy effect.

Several strategies can be adopted to achieve the goals just described. In particular, working on the reintroduction of nature into the urban environment. Biophilic design reintroduces nature into the design process and human experiences, adding aesthetic, textural, and graphic features, both organic and artificial at the scale of the building, site, city, and region to accompany humans through their evolution and improve the physical and mental health of individuals¹⁷. Biophilic design is an approach that holds principles of good design at the building, site, city, and regional scale using the natural asset provided by the context in an environmentally sustainable way by:

- Protecting and enhancing the natural systems and green infrastructures from climatic events, ensuring the provision of essential services;
- Moderating air pollution and balancing microclimate through vegetation and providing cooling, evapotranspiration, shading, and reduction in urban flooding. Green rooftops alone may dramatically contribute to lower urban temperatures;
- Allow native biodiversity to adapt and shift as climate changes through an extensive and diverse network of parks and green spaces;
- Help cities to become more self-sufficient in times of resource scarcity;
- Encourage a healthier lifestyle, resulting in overall energy saving.

The biophilic approach can be described as an outdoor-oriented design at the neighborhood scale, with benefits reaching the regional since the individual level.

17 Robert McDonald, and Timothy Beatley, *Biophilic Cities for an Urban Century: Why Nature Is Essential for the Success of Cities* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2021).

5. The pivotal role of public spaces

The system of urban public spaces — streets, squares, widenings, places of mobility, sociality, and exchange — is the first to be affected by the extreme weather events examined. Being outdoors, environmental discomfort is one of the causes of change in the behavioral patterns of people using public space. This phenomenon leads citizens to increase their awareness of the climatic and environmental crisis, making them progressively more interested and active in participation through bottom-up actions sponsored by activist groups, communities of residents, or interested groups who care about caring for places. For the same reasons, it is precisely on this plane that local government institutions, professionals, collectives, and communities meet the common need to trigger and experiment with innovative processes and designs for change. From a bottom-up point of view, during the pandemic, we have witnessed the intellectual rehabilitation of DIY and tactical urbanism, approaches that involve subtle and interesting technological implications. Bianchi¹⁸ describes its outcomes in terms of design, highlighting the richness of forms and solutions of the broad movement from below devoted to the activation of co-creation processes for the transformation of places. The collective force expressed by these movements can be used as a key resource in adaptive regeneration strategies for the energy transition of cities. The communities can participate in the whole discussion on urban transformation by being directly or indirectly involved by local institutions.

The quality of urban life is closely related to the quality and diversity of public spaces, conceived as a system of elements within the city structure¹⁹. The fragmentation of public spaces affects the perception of well-being and urban livability, leading to greater social and physical marginalization of inhabitants. Public space, in its physical and social dimensions, represents a strategic infrastructure that connects and accommodates urban flows while regulating interactions between individuals and the urban environment²⁰.

In this perspective, a central role is played by the options that public space can offer. That is mixed opportunities according to different targets and needs of citizens, essential and optional functions relevant to daily life activities, a certain degree of accessibility considering a wide range of requirements, environmental and material comfort, and not less importantly, ethical and esthetical features and qualities that contribute to give meaning to that space.

18 Riccardo Bianchi, *La dimensione attiva del progetto. Strategie di allestimento e re-design dello spazio pubblico* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2022).

19 Lidia Errante, "La qualità dell'abitare urbano nel processo di costruzione dello spazio pubblico," *Urbanistica Dossier* 15 (2018): 52-57.

20 *ibid.*

European and national energy transition policies emphasize the key role of urban public spaces and mobility, where several dynamics of transformation and social innovation have experimented with success.

A key element in the reading of public space is street furniture, which is not merely an accessory element but can contain several essential functions or trigger community engagement actions, educating on environmental issues in an engaging, playful, and interactive way.

An example of that is the TANDEM project, commissioned by the Ayuntamiento of Madrid and implemented by the NGO Creàtica with Enorme Studio, PEZestudio, and Todo por La Praxis²¹, is worthy of interest. The Jardines del Arquitecto Ribera plaza is transformed into a laboratory for urban redevelopment and sustainable energy production, hosting three recreational and informative installations, each capable of producing up to 2KW/h from solar photovoltaics. The energy, accessible to residents for their daily needs, fuels the cultural activities planned in the square, promoting a playful use of technological design and integrating the energy transition with the self-building approach that Bianchi describe as “[...] a tool of socialized knowledge and practical awareness to realize projects with informal design, accessible to the whole community of citizens and able to activate dynamic processes of urban regeneration [...]”²². The goal to integrate environmental and energy performance into projects of physical and social quality does not exclude the adoption of eco or capable street furniture, suggesting greater integration with alternative and sustainable sources such as kinetic energy produced by footsteps. For instance, kinetic surfaces used in urban design as technological inserts in sidewalks, bike lanes, playgrounds, or transit locations produce 5 to 7 watts per step, which power an LED bulb for street lighting for 30 seconds. The energy is stored off-site with autonomous or grid-connected accumulators and batteries. While this solution is not inherently participatory, it is an equally interactive solution geared toward the gamification of the space thus created.

The design solutions above described represent viable possibilities that can animate public space by combining energy production with the playful use of furniture. On the other hand, these do not represent the solution to the issue of energy production definitively, as they have a punctual and, therefore, limited impact. Likewise, these are a good pretext for engaging the public and making them aware of the opportunities offered by new technologies in energy production from renewable and clean sources.

21 Todo por la Praxis, “Tandem” (2017), <https://todoporlapraxis.es/092-tandem/>

22 Bianchi, *La dimensione attiva del progetto*.

6. Nature-based solutions in the design approach to sustainable urban regeneration

The Public Space-Public Life²³ approach aimed at urban design has evolved into the Soft City paradigm²⁴, oriented toward urban density, accessibility, and quality of public spaces in neighborhoods and housing estates. In this context, the idea of physical and relational proximity considers the neighborhood a minimal ecological unit, where accessibility is the result of a space-time-opportunity equation. Another example is the concept of the "15-minute city" in Italy well-argued by Ezio Manzini²⁵, and the experiment of Super-Illes of Barcelona (ES) that shows how urban regeneration needs a broader strategy that connects public spaces, mobility, and energy production as part of a more exhaustive concept of functional proximity.

On the other hand, NBSs work according to new design requirements such as safety, health, and eco-compatibility, adopting technologies suitable to the biophilic approach. Design approaches to ecosystem regeneration often adopt Nature-based Solutions (NBS) for improving urban and territorial resilience²⁶. Even acknowledging their benefits, the applications are heterogeneous, requiring multi-scalar and multi-criteria methodological approaches to integrate NBSs into broader urban plans. According to Castellar et alii.²⁷, Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) have emerged to foster sustainable development and transversally addressing social, economic, and environmental urban challenges. At the same time, the authors also admit the difficulty of assessing their performance concerning ESs and urban challenges due to the heterogeneity of the technologies and the solutions applicable.

The recent literature on urban regeneration has seen rising attention on the neighborhood scale, using NBSs for building retrofitting and urban regeneration strategies oriented to an environmental and ecosystemic approach. Two different applications and scales can be distinguished: the building envelope and the public space. The integration of vegetation, vertical or horizontal, promotes evapotranspiration, shading, and reduction of the heat island effect and urban flooding. Green roofs alone can contribute significantly to urban temperature reduction. In this sense, Morabito²⁸ argues that NBSs can provide a concrete response aimed at increasing the resilience of the built environment by supporting urban

23 Jan Gehl, and Birgitte Svarre, *How to Study Public Life: Methods in Urban Design* (Washington, Island, 2013).

24 David Sim, *Soft City: Building Density for Everyday Life* (Washington: Island, 2019).

25 Ezio Manzini, *Abitare la prossimità. Idee per la città dei 15 minuti* (Milano: Egea, 2021).

26 Elena Mussinelli et al. "Il ruolo delle Nature-Based Solutions nel progetto architettonico e urbano," *TECHNE* 15 (2018): 116-123.

27 Joana A. Castellar et al., "Nature-Based Solutions in the Urban Context: Terminology, Classification and Scoring for Urban Challenges and Ecosystem Services," *Science of the Total Environment* 779, no. 146237 (2021).

28 Roberto Morabito, "La transizione verso l'economia circolare in aree e comunità urbane: approccio ENEA," *TECHNE* 22 (2021): 28-34.

and cultural ecosystem services and providing an opportunity for technological advancement. Integrating nature into cities helps reduce UHI, improve air quality, and increase urban resilience²⁹, enhancing and supporting ecosystem services, serving as a tool for climate mitigation and adaptation, and serving as a space for recreation and social cohesion. By the intrinsic nature of public space, these sometimes take on the connotation of green or blue infrastructure, such as the banks of waterways that run through the urban fabric and that, with due differences, help to dispose of and slow down stormwater runoff through the presence of vegetation and organic material that filter its pollutants³⁰.



FIG. 7

Benthemplein watersquare by De Urbanisten. Picture by the author.

NBS has not to be conceived as high technology design: among the many, tree planting and green boulevards are the most common in urban design, providing microclimate mitigation benefits, capturing PM particles by acting directly at the deposition elevation, and improving soil permeability.

Public spaces or street furniture can be designed and used as NBS: shade zones, pergolas, green roofs, and urban seating can accommodate

29 Lidia Errante, "Nature-Based Solutions and Biophilic Design: Eco-systemic Approaches to Regeneration," in *On Sustainable Built Environment: Between Connections and Greenery*, edited by Francesca Scalisi et al. (Palermo: Palermo University Press, 2022): 118-131.

30 Eugenio Morello, Israa Mahmoud and Nicola Colaninno (eds.), *Catalogue of Nature-Based Solutions for Urban Regeneration. Energy & Urban Planning Workshop, School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering* (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2020).



FIG. 8

Benthemplein watersquare by De Urbanisten. Picture by the author.

vegetation and define green cool areas. On the other hand, the proper morphology of land elevations and height differences can represent an optimal solution to manage and control stormwater and urban floods. The case of Benthemplein (Rotterdam) is an international reference in this regard, with results of environmental quality of urban space and livability. The logic adopted for the water square is to have the square level at a lower elevation than the street, making it accessible by stairs and slopes. The systems of three main squares can contain large volumes of rainwater and regulate its runoff. The urban resilience strategy is formally and aesthetically enriched by the surface treatment and articulation of diversified spaces for sports and recreational and leisure activities. The system of squares, arranged to respond to the principle of communicating vessels, is also the result of a participatory process mediated by the designers themselves³¹.

The case of Benthemplein, although not recent, is still a very current example of a Nature-based Solution that integrates solutions inspired by natural processes to face the worsening of the environmental crisis and the consequent extreme climatic events like explosive cyclogenesis. In

31 Alberto De Capua, and Lidia Errante, "Technological design for the environmental transition of the city. Opportunities for innovation | Il design tecnologico per la transizione ambientale della città. Opportunità di innovazione," *TECHNE* 26 (2023): 78–85.

an urban context of soil consumption and sealing, managing rainwater is a concrete emergency, worsened by the progressive deterioration of green and blue infrastructures that naturally regulate water flows. On the other hand, hybrid solutions such as De Urbanisten's Benthemplein represent an opportunity to encourage social interaction and improve the quality of urban living by mitigating the risk of flooding. This combination of engineering, nature, and urban design at the scale of public space has highlighted a positive impact on the well-being of communities, acting on different temporal lengths: the unpredictable one of the extreme climatic event, which has a limited duration but potentially long-term effects, and that of the daily life of the communities, which find in Bonthemple residents in a space of sociality.

7. Future perspective of the research and conclusions

The future of research on climate mitigation strategies and urban regeneration focuses on integrating advanced technologies and ecosystem approaches to improve the sustainability of cities³². This goal can be achieved by conceiving new ways to design and live the urban environment: from the eco-districts to the use of green technologies in building redevelopment, there are unlimited and yet promising solutions for improving urban resilience and quality of life³³. According to several authors, an ecological design should be:

- Planned according to its impact on the social, economic, and environmental spheres;
- Flexible according to scenario steps that take into account the worsening of extreme weather events and climate change phenomena;
- Able to reuse existing buildings and resources³⁴;
- Aim at circularity in the production, execution, and management stages³⁵.

In this sense, the response to environmental challenges cannot be limited to eco-technologies or assessing energy performances. It has to manage at the same time different matters such as the regulation of microclimate, the provision of shading and cooling areas, and, as a consequence, decreasing energy demand. The many solutions offered by technological advancement and eco-design, in general, all contribute to accelerating a process of ecological transition that involves a broad spectrum of

32 De Capua and Errante, "INA-Casa a Reggio Calabria."

33 *ibid.*

34 Tom Bergevoet, and Maarten von Tuijl, *The Flexible City: Sustainable Solutions for a Europe in Transition* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2016).

35 Lidia Errante, "Hybrid Communities and Resilient Places: Sustainability in a Post-Pandemic Perspective," in *Possible and Preferable Scenarios of a Sustainable Future: Towards 2030 and Beyond*, edited by Cesare Sposito (Palermo: Palermo University Press, 2021): 32-45.

sustainable behaviors, from the habits of everyday life, with significant impacts on the perception of a healthy and safe place³⁶.

This evolutionary process of technique and design culture mediates not only between man and nature, which is the premise of the investigation. Also, as Los expected, we are witnessing a progressive merging of languages and communication codes related to sustainable architecture. Green technologies are no longer just an expression of a performance requirement, managing to integrate different functions, increasingly understood, promoted, and defended by politics and society.

At a time in history characterized by social, cultural, geopolitical, economic, and climatic changes, urban transformation plays a driving role in investing and supporting such a necessary ecological transition.

From this perspective, there are three requirements of technological design:

Alternative: i.e., able to provide alternatives adaptable to different contexts and social dynamics, non-dogmatic to innovation and ecological transition processes potentially unsuitable for socio-economic contexts characterized by energy and economic poverty. That is, introducing behavioral patterns oriented to save energy and reduce consumption where it is not viable to submit structural or infrastructural transformations.

Proximity: using relational proximity and social innovation as key elements of urban ecological transition strategies from a local perspective, activating support networks, collaborative and shared management, and production models. Manzini³⁷ describes it as a diverse, relational, and hybrid proximity similar to the 15-Minute City model.

Disordered: according to Sendra and Sennet³⁸, an open and flexible urban form turns out to be more robust, allowing more creative use of technological tools. Overcoming the hyper-determination of both the visual forms of the city and its social functions (ibid.), the urban morphology can be adaptable and rearrangeable according to controlled chaos. Other than allowing new possibilities, combinations, and bottom-up expressions, this paradigm enhances the flexible form of the city and its capacity to respond with resilience to extreme climate events.

Open Source: capable of realizing, within function and design, a stratification of meaning by considering the urban context as a palimpsest, the result of shared choices and self-determination where actions and strategies can be replicated, disseminated, and repurposed³⁹.

36 Errante, "Nature-Based Solutions and Biophilic Design."

37 Manzini, *Abitare la prossimità*.

38 Pablo Sendra, and Richard Sennett, *Designing Disorder. Experiments and Disruptions in the City* (London: Verso, 2020).

39 Carlo Ratti (a cura di), *Architettura Open Source. Verso una progettazione aperta* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014).

The innovation required from the technology is redeeming itself with nature through sustainable solutions to directly or indirectly guarantee well-being and environmental comfort for citizens. Foreseeing energy alternatives in technological design meet environmental, social, and economic sustainability requirements. The emergence of climate change determines new design needs that can only be addressed through an ecological approach that requires a deeper knowledge of the phenomena that occur in climate change and how they impact specific urban assets. Technologies and design solutions can be considered appropriate to solve local environmental contingencies if embedded in precise urban plans that consider the quality of ESs and the capability of territories and communities to adapt.

The approach must be mutual: on the one hand, monitoring climate data to simulate the intensity, frequency, and recurrence of extreme climatic events, considering their impact on the short and long run; on the other hand, understanding how urban morphologies, building materials, and canopies can worsen the effect of climate challenges to and how to use design to correct the micro-climatic aberrations of contemporary cities.

Graduated with honors in Architecture in 2015, **Lidia Errante** obtained a PhD in Architecture and Territory in 2019 from the *Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria (UniRC)*, where she currently works as a research fellow. Her research focuses on architectural technology, sustainable living, and inclusive and accessible public spaces, with particular attention to their impact on quality of life. She is co-founder and coordinator of the teaching activities of the Research Unit MeTA – Methods and Techniques for Living. Design for Everyday Life (dAeD – Department of Architecture and Design). Formerly a contract lecturer in Visual Identity, she also serves as thesis advisor and reviewer for undergraduate and master's theses in Design and Architecture. She is the author of numerous scientific publications.

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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, 1990); 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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