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Dissolution of the City?



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COVER PHOTO

After the City by U. Gehmann



Editorial

In our last issue, we dealt with basic assumptions and premises underlying a Western conception of the city as the habitat of free citizens, and the understanding of such a citizenship in its relation to democracy. In the issue forthcoming, it is about the actual value of these assumptions and premises in recent cities and their successors, the urban agglomerations of today. We are witnessing the times of social media as a new kind of public space. The question arises if the assumptions and premises underlying the understanding of the Western city as it was are still valid; or if our understanding of city, citizenship and democracy has to be radically questioned.

In regards to the traditional, historical city as a place for citizens, for people who live there, mass tourism and AirBnBzation of historical cities has changed this dramatically. In addition, and not confined to historical cities, gentrification and the housing problem has led to the unaffordability of living in the core areas of a city. The city became an investment object, not a place for citizens. Together with these factors, digitalization of cities, lack of places deserving the name in modern cities and other effects led to an actual demise of the city in its traditional understanding, namely to be a place for citizens.

Today's cities are seeing the deterioration of their city centres, with population moving out, business having to relocate, and abandonment seems to be the signature of the central city. What is left is a space without human beings, without commerce, without parks and gathering areas, just the concrete, steel, and glass of the buildings. This dehumanization of the city has the effect of destroying the concept of community, collective consciousness and the very identity that had built these cities into thriving spaces in past decades. Individuals seeing this cannot see a future in the city for themselves or for their children, the future generation. In turn citizenship is lost, and the question to be asked will be how to rebuild the city core to make it a setting for future generations. The very fact that this abandonment is happening does not bode well for the city, a place that civilized beings in the past had built as a space of culture, community, and belonging.

In many cities the non-development of green areas/parks and other places for people to meet in and have dialogue, as well as having a feeling of belonging is non-existent. Parallel to this the structural setup of transportation, other than the automobile, has lacked creativity and a much-needed updated city planning. Hence this fails community and citizenship itself.

If an active citizenship needs places to unfold where a sense of neighbourhood, belonging and identity can be developed, the majority of recent cities do not meet this criterion. If active citizenship is a premise for free citizens and hence for democracy, where is such an active citizenship possible today? If not confined to protests?

Outlay of contributions

Loveneet Thakur addresses in *Planned Utopia, Unplanned Periphery* the changes of Chandigarh in India, a former ideal city built by Le Corbusier, that in new developments that led to the actual demise of the former ideal, together with a loss of the sense for citizenship.

In *The Compound City*, **Francesco Procacci** deals with compound settlements, a tendency towards gated communities that isolate themselves from the rest of the city and its inhabitants. A tendency with cumulative impacts for the city as a whole, and for the sense of citizenship as well.

Grant F. Raynham's *Collective Consciousness and Self Identity* is investigating consequences that result from the emergence of a new public space, the social media. Paralleled by a weakening of social bondages in both the "old" public space of the city and this new public space, leading to a tendency towards nihilism on a social and individual level.

The contribution of **Andy Harrod**, *Rewilding the Animal who lives with the City*, looks at community gardens as a way out of the existing tendencies of social fragmentation and isolation of people. Such gardens revitalize a sense for community and belonging, as a counterforce to the neoliberal practice of individualistic isolation.

Jessie Croteau goes one step further in *Let the City Fall Apart*. Instead of looking at urban decline as a civic evil only, urban deterioration can be a chance for new developments. It is about decline as the possibility for new, positive unfolding.

In *Palimpsest City* **Juliana Valentim** lays the foundations for how the city can be interpreted as a palimpsest archetype and argues that memory can be seen as form of resistance against commodification processes.

ARTISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Artistic contributions help to perceive life in today's urban and social circumstances in an additional dimension. Together with texts, such contributions lead the way to a holistic perception of the topics dealt with in this journal issue.

In *Urban Fragments* from **Faranak Tiba**, relations between citizenship and consumption are looked at, offering perspectives of the urban environment shaped by recent liberal capitalism.

La Grande Bouffe by **Isabel Engelmann** searches for the cracks in the polished image of the modern city, symbolized by a triptych of three consecutive images. She presents standstills of consumption and void as sceneries, arranged in the tradition of the vanitas motive from former eras.

In *When the City Breathes Again*, **Sonja Bell** presents the artist Katerina Belkina's with her *For All Mankind*, a sequence of scenes focusing on a Zeitgeist-relevant manner of an isolated individual presenting itself.

Enjoy reading,

Karlsruhe in early Summer 2026

Ulrich Gehmann and Andreas Siess

Planned Utopia, Unplanned Periphery

How Housing Pressures Erase Cultural Heritage,
Identity, and Citizenship – The Chandigarh Story

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Introduction: A City That Once Defined Citizenship

What does it mean to lose cultural heritage? Often, we think of crumbling monuments, forgotten rituals, or silenced languages. But there is a quieter, more pervasive loss: the destruction of urban planning as heritage and the erosion of citizenship through bad housing. I write this from **Chandigarh – India’s first planned city, designed by Le Corbusier in the 1950s. For decades, this city was a living symbol of modern citizenship: every resident, regardless of income, had access to parks, schools, markets, and pedestrian-friendly roads.** The very layout of the city affirmed that a citizen is not just a taxpayer or a voter, but a person entitled to light, air, community, and dignity.

But today, Chandigarh tells another story. While the original city remains protected, its periphery – towns like Zirakpur, Kharar, Mohali, Panchkula, and Naya Gaon – has become a cautionary example of how unplanned housing can strip people of their cultural identity, their sense of belonging, and their basic rights as citizens. This article is an attempt to understand that loss, and to ask: Can we still build homes that nurture citizenship?



Figure 1: Imagery of “The Open Hand symbol, designed by architect LeCorbusier, is the **official emblem of Chandigarh** and represents the philosophy of being “**open to give and open to receive**”.

Part 1: Chandigarh's Planning as Cultural Heritage

After India's Partition in 1947, the state of Punjab lost its former capital, Lahore, to Pakistan. The need for a new capital was urgent – not just for administration, but for healing. **Chandigarh was conceived as a symbol of hope, modernity, and order.** Le Corbusier's master plan was radical: the city was divided into sectors, each self-contained with a school, health centre, market, green park, and community spaces. **The famous "7V" road system separated pedestrians, cyclists, and fast traffic. Heritage is not only monuments.** It includes systems of living that embody a community's values. In Chandigarh, the value was egalitarian citizenship. A judge, a professor, and a shopkeeper all lived in similar-looking houses, all within walking distance of a park. **The Capitol Complex (High Court, Assembly, Secretariat) is a UNESCO World Heritage site, but so is the idea of the sector – a spatial expression of social democracy.** (Imagery 1.1)



Imagery 1.1 (Punjab and Haryana High Court, Assembly, Secretariat)

For decades, strict laws preserved this identity. The Punjab New Capital (Periphery) Control Act, 1952, restricted unplanned growth within a 16-kilometer radius. The Chandigarh Master Plan limited floors to three and banned encroachment on green areas. The Supreme Court of India and the Punjab and Haryana High Court, through a series of judgments and orders, have done their best to uphold the dignity and quality of life of people from a housing perspective. The Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed that the core 30 sectors of Chandigarh must be protected, warning that unauthorized construction would “injure the lungs” of the city. These judicial interventions have been instrumental in keeping the original city livable, even as other Indian cities collapsed into chaos.

Part 2: The Periphery – Where Heritage Ends and Loss Begins

Chandigarh is a Union Territory serving as the capital of both Punjab and Haryana. It is a hub for the Punjab & Haryana High Court, major hospitals (PGI, GMCH), educational institutions (Panjab University), and administrative bodies. **Thousands migrate here daily from Himachal, Jammu & Kashmir, Rajasthan, and beyond. The city's population has long exceeded its planned capacity. Land is scarce, and real estate is astronomical.** Since new construction inside Chandigarh is heavily regulated, development has exploded in peripheral areas: **Mohali, Zirakpur, Kharar, Banur, Lalru, Derabassi, and Panchkula.** These towns are marketed as “affordable Chandigarh” – but they lack almost every feature that made Chandigarh humane.



Imagery 2.1: Depicts the borders of Chandigarh that how daily a large sum of migrants travel into the Territory.

The loss manifests in multiple dimensions. First, there is the loss of physical health and environmental citizenship. High-rise buildings packed with no spacing block sunlight and cross-ventilation. **There are no designated parks, trees, or green buffers. Construction on seasonal water channels (locally called “N-choes”) leads to flooding, waterlogging, and diseases like dengue, malaria, and typhoid. Residents are effectively denied the right to clean air and light – a basic citizenship entitlement in any planned city. (Imagery 2.2)** Second, there is the loss of social identity and community. Unlike Chandigarh’s sectors with community centres and markets, these new colonies have no shared spaces. People live in vertical silos, rarely meeting their neighbours. Children do not play outdoors – a fact noted by cardiologist Dr. Amit Gupta, who warns of early lifestyle diseases. Social isolation leads to depression, anxiety, and domestic stress.



Imagery 2.2 *Water-logged streets in front of a residential society. (Mohali)*

When **Mr. Ulrich Gehmann** visited India, I had the privilege of accompanying him to meet **Dr. Amit Gupta**, a renowned cardiologist in Chandigarh. During that meeting, **Dr. Gupta** shared some deeply concerning observations. He explained that due to the lack of proper design in these peripheral housing colonies – with no open spaces, no parks, and no grounds – children simply cannot play outdoors. They cannot cycle or engage in any physical activity. What makes this even more alarming, **Dr. Gupta** said, **is that younger children do not see their older peers playing or cycling. There is no modeling of active behaviour. Consequently, the younger children develop no desire to play, to cycle, or to engage in any physical activity at all. Dr. Gupta called this a very bad trend that will severely impact the health of future generations. (Image 2.3)** He further noted that because residents have no access to good sunlight, fresh air, or proper water, people are falling ill, becoming depressive, and suffering from a range of diseases. He emphasised, with the authority of a cardiologist who has seen thousands of patients, that proper architecture and proper design are absolutely essential for a long and healthy life of citizens. His words stayed with me: without design, there is no dignity; without dignity, there is no health.



Imagery 2.3 (Chandigarh, Sector 17) depicts cyclists or Daily cycle commuters making a good use of the cycle track.

Third, there is the loss of safety and civic order. Narrow, unlit lanes with no service roads cause daily traffic jams. Ambulances and fire brigades often struggle to reach their destinations on time. Poor lighting and unplanned layouts increase crime and substance abuse – there is no “eyes on the street.” Fourth, there is the loss of economic citizenship. **Families take large bank loans to buy homes that are legally and structurally defective. They become trapped: loan EMIs continue, but quality of life collapses. Broken marriages, health crises, and financial distress are routine. In short, these peripheries are not extensions of Chandigarh’s heritage– they are anti-Chandigarhs.** And in losing the plan, residents lose their identity as citizens who deserve a humane habitat.

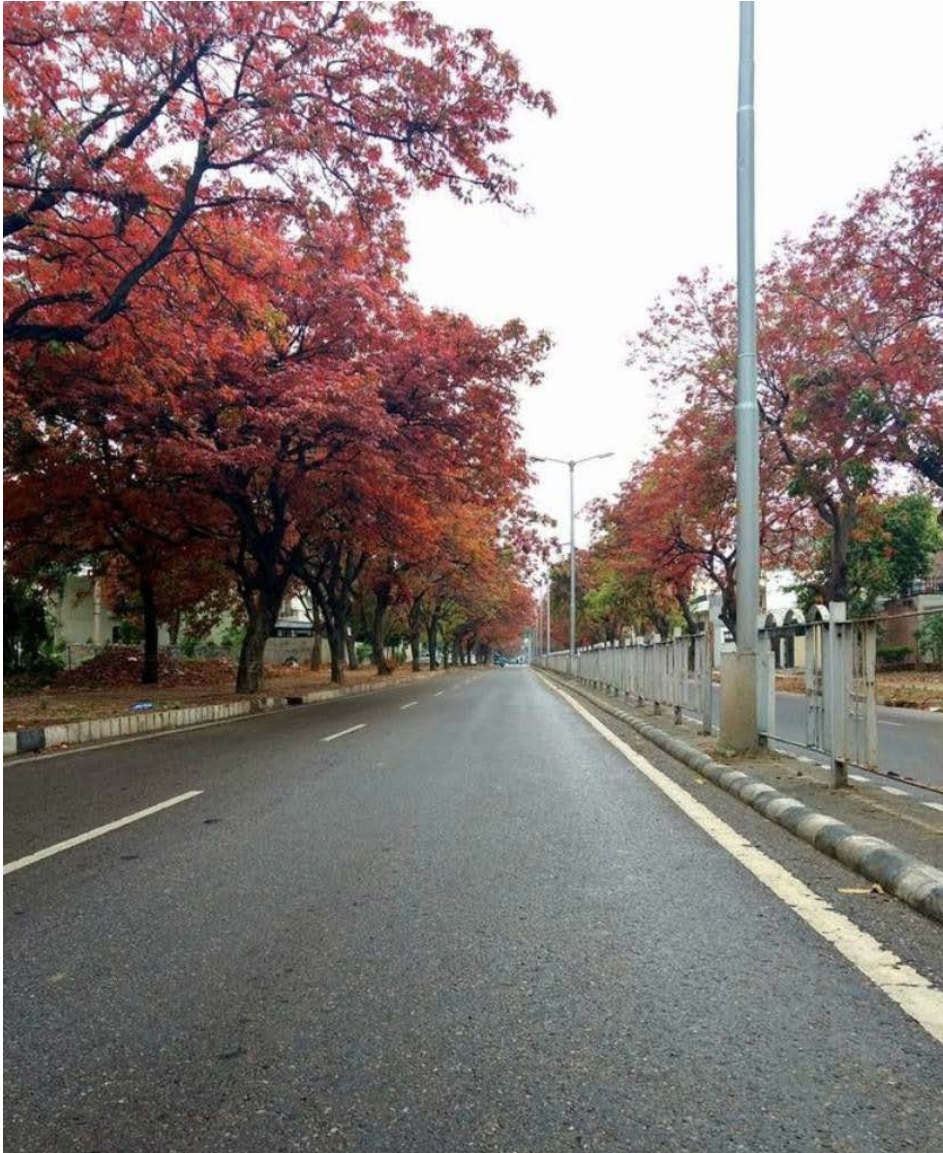
Part 3: Government Efforts – Acknowledging Progress Without Hiding Gaps

It would be unfair to say the government has done nothing. In fact, successive state and central governments have recognised the crisis and initiated several legal and policy measures. The Punjab Apartment and Property Regulation Act, 1995 (amended 2013), made it mandatory for developers to provide open spaces, parking, and community facilities, with non-compliance leading to cancellation of licenses. The Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016 (RERA), a landmark central law, requires registration of projects, disclosure of layouts and amenities, and establishes fast-track dispute resolution for homebuyers. Under RERA, builders can be penalized for deviations from approved plans. The Punjab Regional and Town Planning Act, 1995 (as amended), empowers authorities like the Greater Mohali Area Development Authority (GMADA) to enforce master plans for peripheral areas. The Chandigarh Periphery Control Act, 1952, has also been amended to include stricter penalties for unauthorized colonies.

On the ground, GMADA has prepared a Regional Master Plan for 2031 covering Mohali, Kharar, Zirakpur, and surrounding villages, mandating minimum green area per capita, road width standards, and drainage systems. The Punjab government has launched affordable housing schemes that require basic infrastructure, though implementation has been uneven. Between 2022 and 2024, the government also carried out demolition drives against illegal constructions in Zirakpur and Derabassi.

Despite these efforts, the scale of the problem – driven by rapid urbanization, migration, and the deep cultural value attached to owning a house – far exceeds the current pace of reform. Enforcement remains weak because local bodies often lack staff, technical expertise, or political will. Many illegal buildings receive “post-facto” approval, a loophole that encourages violations. Builders exploit the emotional need for home ownership, cutting costs on parks, roads, and drainage, while buyers – desperate for affordable homes – do not ask questions until it is too late. Additionally, jurisdiction is

fragmented: Chandigarh is a Union Territory, Mohali and Panchkula are in Punjab, and Panchkula is partly in Haryana. Coordinated regional planning is still weak, though memoranda of understanding exist. The government is trying, but the gap between law and implementation remains significant.



Imagery 3.1: depicts a regular Chandigarh road after a short drizzle.

Part 4: The Deeper Wound – Loss of Cultural Identity and Citizenship

For a resident of a planned Chandigarh sector, identity is tied to spatial memory: the corner park where you played as a child, the shaded market where you bought groceries, the cycle track you used daily. That identity is relational – it connects you to neighbours, to nature, to the state as a provider of public goods. **In the periphery, that identity is erased. There are no landmarks, no shared stories, no public realm. People become mere occupants, not citizens. Citizenship is not just a legal status – it is the**

ability to claim rights: to health, safety, association, and participation (Imagery 4.1). When your colony has no park, you cannot claim the right to recreation. **When roads are too narrow for an ambulance, your right to life is compromised. When there is no community hall, your right to assembly is hollow.** The peripheries of Chandigarh thus produce a second-class citizenship – one where people pay taxes, vote, and take loans, but receive no spatial dignity in return.



Imagery 4.1: depicts a water-logged road in Zirakpur and a Public transport stuck in a pothole.

Perhaps most tragically, children growing up in these unplanned colonies will never know what a planned city feels like. They will normalise congestion, darkness, and isolation. Their cultural reference will be chaos – and they will not even know what has been lost. That is the deepest form of heritage destruction: the inability to mourn what you never experienced. **The Supreme Court of India and the Punjab and Haryana High Court have, through numerous orders and judgments, consistently tried to uphold the dignity and quality of life of people from a housing perspective. They have struck down illegal constructions, restrained floor-wise fragmentation, and demanded accountability from authorities.** Yet, judicial pronouncements alone cannot replace proactive planning and enforcement on the ground.

Part 5: What Must Change – A Roadmap for Policy and Law

Drawing from Chandigarh's failures and the government's ongoing efforts, I propose the following path forward – not as a distant ideal, but as urgent, actionable steps. First, we must strengthen, not replace, existing laws. RERA and town planning acts are strong on paper. **They need autonomous enforcement bodies with technical experts, not political appointees. Strict pre-approval audits of drainage, green space, road width, and sunlight access must be conducted before any foundation is laid. Second, regional planning must have teeth.** Chandigarh, Mohali, Panchkula, Zirakpur, and Kharar should be declared a single planning region under a unified authority – a Regional Development Council – with representatives from Punjab, Haryana, and the Union Territory. **The authority's master plan must be legally binding, with any deviation treated as a criminal offence for builders and grounds for dismissal for officials.**

Third, we must incentivise ethical builders. Not all builders are predatory; many want to build well but fear being undercut by violators. Fast-track approvals and tax benefits should be offered for projects that exceed minimum green and community space requirements. A certification mark – “Chandigarh Standard for Human Habitat” – could be created that buyers can trust. Fourth, public awareness must be used as a legal tool.

Courts and governments should fund legal literacy campaigns for homebuyers: “Before you buy, ask for the park, the drain, the path.” Neighborhood Right-to-Information (RTI)



networks can allow citizens to report violations directly to the High Court. Fifth, heritage designation should be extended to planned systems. **LeCorbusier's sectoral design and road hierarchy should be formally protected as intangible cultural heritage under UNESCO or national heritage laws. Any new housing project in the periphery should be required to demonstrate how it incorporates these principles – not as nostalgia, but as living standards. Finally, judicial leadership must continue.** The Supreme Court and the Punjab and Haryana High Court have already shown remarkable commitment. This can be expanded into a continuous monitoring mechanism, with court-commissioned inspections and regular compliance reports.

Conclusion: From Housing to Homeland

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues in this workshop on Loss of Cultural Heritage, Identity, and Citizenship – we often look for loss in ruins and relics. But sometimes, loss happens in plain sight, in the crowded lanes of a new town, in the lungs of a child who has never played in a park, in the silence of neighbours who never meet. **Chandigarh taught India and the world that a city can be an act of citizenship. Its periphery teaches us that when planning is abandoned, citizenship is the first casualty. The government is making efforts. RERA, new masterplans, and judicial oversight are not empty words – they are tools.** But tools are only as good as the hands that wield them. We need more hands: courts, civil society, ethical builders, and above all, informed citizens who refuse to trade their dignity for a roof. **A house is not a home. A home is not a habitat. And a habitat without heritage, without identity, without citizenship – is just a place to slowly fall ill and feel alone.** Let us build differently. Let us build for light, air, earth, and each other. That is the only heritage worth leaving behind.

Thank you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Loveneet Thakur is an Advocate practicing primarily before the Punjab and Haryana High Court at Chandigarh. He has worked on matters relating to urban planning, housing rights, and heritage protection. This article was prepared for the 3-day hybrid workshop on “*Loss of Cultural Heritage, Identity, and Citizenship*” at the Ideal Spaces Foundation, Karlsruhe, Germany, September 2026. The author acknowledges the ongoing efforts of the Indian government and judiciary while highlighting areas needing urgent attention.



The Compound City

How gated urbanism is reshaping the structure of contemporary cities

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Abstract – The proliferation of gated communities and residential compounds has reshaped urban development across diverse contexts, from rapidly growing cities in Asia to more established environments. While these enclaves respond to legitimate demands for safety, order, and quality of life, their cumulative impact on the city remains underexamined. This paper argues that compound-based urbanism produces fragmentation, weakening the continuity of shared urban space and the social conditions that support collective life. By contrasting enclosed developments with the neighborhood as an open and relational system, it proposes a shift from isolation to connection as a foundation for urban resilience.

1. Introduction

Cities are often described through skylines, infrastructure, density, or economic growth. Yet their deeper structure lies elsewhere: in the way space is shared, crossed, negotiated, and inhabited by different people over time. Urban life depends not only on what is built, but on the relationships between what is private and what is collective, between protected interiors and common ground, between individual comfort and the continuity of the city as a whole.

This reflection is also informed by direct professional experience in urban design across Southeast Asia, particularly in rapidly urbanizing and emerging contexts such as Vietnam. The reflections developed in the Vietnamese case study are grounded not only in literature, but in practice-based observation through direct involvement in urban design projects. In such contexts, urban transformation happens at extraordinary speed. Entire districts can appear within a few years, new roads can reorganize territories overnight, and large residential developments often become the dominant form through which urban growth is materialized. This speed makes visible tendencies that in slower contexts remain less apparent. Processes that elsewhere unfold gradually can be observed in accelerated form: privatization of space, large-scale speculative growth, infrastructure-led expansion, and the rapid production of new residential identities.

Across many parts of the world, one of these tendencies has become increasingly influential: the rise of the compound. Known under different names – *gated community*, *private enclave*, *secured cluster*, *managed development* – it represents more than a housing typology. It expresses a broader urban logic in which quality, safety, maintenance, and environmental comfort are increasingly delivered within bounded spaces rather than through the city itself.

This paper argues that the issue is not the existence of compounds as isolated projects, but their normalization as a dominant model of urbanization. When repeated at scale, they do not simply add new neighborhoods to the city. They alter the structure of urban life by fragmenting continuity, internalizing value, and weakening the shared spaces on which collective urbanity depends.



Figure 1: A wall divides two urban realities. On one side, comfort, greenery, and controlled amenities. On the other, congestion, informality, and neglected public space. The image captures the central paradox of the compound city: private quality achieved through collective separation.

2. The Promise of Safety

The success of the compound cannot be understood without acknowledging the real conditions to which it responds. In many cities, public space is poorly maintained, traffic is overwhelming, sidewalks are unsafe or absent, environmental quality is uneven, and public services are unreliable. Under these circumstances, the appeal of a controlled environment is immediate and understandable.

The compound promises something simple but powerful: a better everyday life. This appeal can be found in very different contexts: suburban gated communities in North America, secured compounds in the Middle East, private townships in Asia, and luxury enclaves in rapidly growing emerging cities. It offers cleaner streets, greenery, reduced traffic, predictable management, and a sense of security. For families, it can mean children playing outdoors with less fear. For elderly residents, it can mean calmer surroundings. For investors, it represents clarity and market value. For developers, it is easier to package, market, and maintain than the open complexity of the city.

Inside these environments, many things genuinely work. Landscapes are maintained, lighting is functional, waste is collected, entrances are monitored, and shared amenities are visible. Compared with neglected urban surroundings, the contrast can be striking. It would therefore be simplistic to dismiss compounds as irrational choices or merely symbolic aspirations.

Their strength lies precisely in the fact that they respond to legitimate desires: dignity, order, comfort, and peace of mind. The question raised here is not why people choose them. The deeper question is what happens when the satisfaction of these needs is increasingly detached from the city and relocated inside private boundaries.

Because once urban quality is expected primarily inside enclaves, the city outside risks being redefined as the space where such quality is absent *by default*.



Figure 2: A dense and continuous urban fabric in Saigon, where life unfolds without clear boundaries. This is the kind of city that compounds attempt to escape from — but also the one they gradually fragment.

3. The Logic of Enclosure

The compound is not only a residential product. It is a *spatial logic*. It organizes the city through separation, access control, internal management, and selective comfort. Its promise depends on a clear distinction between inside and outside: inside, order; outside, uncertainty. Inside, landscape; outside, traffic. Inside, maintenance; outside, negotiation.

This distinction may appear harmless when considered at the scale of a single project. A compound can function well as an isolated development. The problem begins when the same model is repeated across large portions of the city. At that point, the urban fabric no longer grows as a continuous system of streets, blocks, services, and public spaces. It becomes a sequence of controlled fragments.

The street is one of the first elements to change meaning. Instead of functioning as a place of exchange, encounter, commerce, and shared movement, it becomes increasingly reduced to circulation infrastructure. It connects entrances, but not necessarily lives. Wide roads may still connect traffic flows, yet they often fail to connect urban life.

This produces a subtle but important shift. The spaces between compounds are no longer understood as the primary substance of the city. They become residual. They exist between private projects, but they are rarely designed with the same care, investment,



or ambition. The compound internalizes value, while the space outside is left to carry the burden of movement, congestion, service access, and social inequality.

The logic of enclosure also expands beyond housing. Retail becomes concentrated in malls. Education and healthcare become private destinations. Leisure moves into managed environments. The city becomes less a continuous field of shared services and more a network of controlled interiors connected by infrastructure.

For this reason, the problem is not the wall itself. The wall is only the most visible symptom. The deeper problem is the cumulative transformation of urban structure. A city made of successful enclaves may still fail as a city if the relationships between those enclaves are neglected.

4. Vietnam: The Compound City in Practice

The Vietnamese experience is particularly instructive in understanding the rise of compound urbanism. In both Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, rapid urbanization has been accompanied by the expansion of large private residential compounds and integrated developments. These projects often provide internal landscapes, leisure amenities, controlled access, and highly marketable lifestyles. Their success is real and visible.

Yet they also reveal the structural limits of compound urbanism. High-quality internal environments frequently coexist with fragmented streets, weak pedestrian continuity, and a public realm outside the perimeter that remains secondary to the internal world of the project.

In Ho Chi Minh City, where metropolitan growth has extended far beyond the historic core, compounds often operate as self-sufficient islands connected primarily through major roads and private mobility. The development is often impressive in scale and speed, but the relationship between these new fragments and the surrounding city remains fragile. The question is not whether these places are comfortable inside. Many of them are. The question is what kind of city is produced when comfort is concentrated within boundaries.

In Hanoi, the contrast can be different but equally revealing. New expansion areas and large residential projects coexist with older, finer-grained urban fabrics where daily life spills into streets, courtyards, markets, and sidewalks. These older districts may be congested, imperfect, and difficult to manage, but they often retain a degree of permeability and social intensity that enclosed developments struggle to reproduce.

The Vietnamese case shows that compound urbanism is not simply a matter of architectural form. It is a question of urban relationship. A project can be green, clean, and well-managed internally, while still contributing to a weaker public realm externally. This is the central paradox. The compound may solve problems for its residents, but if repeated as a dominant model, it can intensify the fragmentation of the city as a whole.



Figure 3: A controlled and curated environment, where nature, space, and life are carefully composed. A vision of the city simplified — and separated from the complexity outside.

5. The Neighborhood as Alternative

The alternative proposed here is not *nostalgia*, nor the romanticization of older urban forms. It is the neighborhood understood as an open and relational unit of urban life. Unlike the compound, the neighborhood is not defined by exclusion but by proximity, permeability, and shared use.

A functioning neighborhood allows daily life to unfold within short distances. Basic services, schools, small commerce, green areas, and spaces of encounter are embedded in the local fabric rather than isolated in distant destinations. Streets are not designed only for throughput, but for coexistence. Slower movement, frequent crossings, active ground floors, and visible public life all contribute to a different urban atmosphere.

In such contexts, safety emerges through presence rather than through filtering. People know faces, routines, shops, corners, and rhythms. Not everyone knows each other personally, yet familiarity accumulates through repetition. This form of everyday recognition can produce confidence in ways that no gate can fully substitute.

The neighborhood also enables a richer relationship between social and ecological life. Trees, small parks, shared courtyards, community gardens, and local public spaces are not amenities reserved for insiders. They become part of a connected urban system. A local grocery, a childcare facility, a café, a shaded bench, or a shared garden may appear modest in isolation, yet together they create the daily ecology of neighborhood life. Their value is environmental, but also civic: they create occasions for use, encounter, and collective stewardship.

Importantly, the neighborhood does not eliminate complexity. Noise, difference, negotiation, and occasional conflict remain part of urban life. But rather than escaping complexity through enclosure, it organizes coexistence through design. It mediates between home and city, privacy and publicness, individuality and common life.

A neighborhood does not emerge automatically from residential density or from the simple repetition of housing blocks. It requires *deliberate spatial choices*. Streets must be safe enough for children and older people, not only efficient for vehicles. Daily services should be embedded within walking distance rather than concentrated in distant mono-functional zones. Different housing types can support social diversity and life-cycle change. Green spaces should be distributed, accessible, and connected to everyday

routes. Small public places — a bench, a square, a corner shop, a shaded threshold — often matter as much as larger formal parks. Permeability is equally important: multiple paths, visual openness, and frequent connections allow the neighborhood to remain part of the city rather than a protected island within it.



Figure 4: *Everyday life spilling into the street. The neighborhood is not designed as a system, but lived as a shared condition.*

6. A Different Urban Future

Contemporary urban life is changing in ways that make the local scale increasingly important. Remote and hybrid work, digital services, home-based care, online commerce, and flexible routines are reshaping the geography of everyday life. Many activities once tied to specialized destinations now happen closer to home or within domestic space itself. Work meetings, shopping, education support, care routines, and social coordination increasingly overlap with the domestic sphere.

This does not make cities obsolete. On the contrary, it changes what matters inside them. The quality of the immediate environment — the walkable street, the nearby service, the local park, the possibility of meeting others without long displacement — becomes more significant.

In this context, the contrast between compounds and neighborhoods becomes sharper. Both respond, in different ways, to the growing importance of local life. The compound does so by internalizing functions inside a closed world. The neighborhood does so by strengthening proximity while remaining connected to the wider city.

The future of urbanism may depend less on iconic architecture or large-scale masterplans than on how successfully cities redesign the spaces of everyday life. If local living becomes central, then the question is whether that locality will be enclosed or shared, private or civic, disconnected or relational.

A city of compounds can produce comfort in fragments. A city of neighborhoods can produce coherence across differences. The distinction is not minor. It may define the social and spatial resilience of future urban life.

7. Conclusion

The compound is not inherently wrong. It answers real demands and often delivers tangible improvements for those who live within it. For this reason, its global spread is understandable. Yet understanding its appeal should not prevent criticism of its broader consequences.

When enclosure becomes the default response to urban problems, the city itself is gradually displaced as the space where quality, safety, and belonging are expected to exist. Shared ground weakens, continuity erodes, and everyday urban relations become thinner.

Cities are not sustained only by buildings, investments, or infrastructure. They are sustained by the spaces between things: the street crossed daily, the shop encountered repeatedly, the park used by strangers, the ordinary environments where coexistence is practiced without ceremony.

The central question, then, is not whether compounds function *in isolation*. It is whether urban life can remain collective when its best conditions are increasingly withdrawn behind boundaries.

The neighborhood offers *another direction*. Not a perfect model, but a more generative one: open, connected, locally supportive, and still part of a larger whole. In an urban century marked by inequality, climate pressure, and changing patterns of life, that difference matters.

FIGURES LICENSING NOTE

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Collective Consciousness and Self Identity

Lost or Being Redefined on a Journey to Nihilism

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METADATA

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Abstract – What is being presented in this essay is a view into the relationship between loss of identity and collective consciousness within society/community and the Self. This is paralleled with the adaptations relative to the new internet/social media outer world and the possible journey to individual and societal nihilism, as is discussed from the point of view of the writer. This may or may not agree with other opinions on the subject matter, but it is one point-of-view.

In looking at today's society there is a trend away from dialogue and connection with the existent physical outer world, the outer world that was and is a part of every human beings' life from birth: encompassing the family unit, community, friends, workplace associates. Collective consciousness had been a phenomenon that in the civilized past had driven societal and community identity, and that was always seen as a cornerstone of society and community over time. Durkheim stated: "The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or creative consciousness."¹

Zuckerfeld stated that "The different disciplines that have studied knowledge share an understanding of it as a product of human subjects – individual, collective, etc."²

Collective consciousness can provide an understanding of the relationship between Self and society. As Zuckerfeld states, "Even though it impels us, as a first customary gesture, to analyse the subjective (such as individual consciousness) or intersubjective bearers (such as the values of a given society), in other words those which Marxism and sociology examine, now we can approach them in an entirely different light"³

Identity being what a community or society defines as the communal characteristics that define the mutuality of it and the aspects that bind its members together. Numerous theories on this were developed by the likes of Durkheim, Jung, Freud to mention but a few.

The Self as an identity exists (who I am, where I come from, the individual's self-value based on the real community and society that surrounds the individual from a human's first moments on earth). Furthermore, research suggests that Self and identity have significant impacts on well-being, behaviour, self-esteem and interpersonal relationships within a society and culture. Therefore, research into Self and identity in humans is crucial to acknowledge, as few other species demonstrate behaviours relating to self-rec-

1 Emile Durkheim, AZ quotes, Wind & Fly LTD. 2026.

2 https://en-wikipedia.org/wiki/collective_consciousness#cite-note-zuckerfeld 31-14.

3 https://en-wikipedia.org/wiki/collective_consciousness#cite-note-zuckerfeld.

ognition and identity. The key areas involved in the investigation of self and identity include self-concept, self-esteem, and self-control.⁴

Yet society and community seemingly are losing their identity in the present day, and the Self is being negated, or has lost its relevance in today's generation. This younger generation seems to be adrift in a sea of confusion as to their true-identity, and the loss of an established collective consciousness. In my point-of-view, identity is being lost in part due to the advancements in technology (inclusive of social media and AI), voyeuristic commercialisation of democratic process, the socioeconomic situation that is in transition, and the fragmentation of society. My assumption is that collective consciousness in past generations was driven by common thinking and sense of being within individuals within a specific group. There was in the past dialogue and exchange between members of the group that created the communal being of the individual within the community and society. Society and communities were built on the social fabric that knitted the individuals together, the communal ties of everyday life. Within this a dialogue was established that allowed for the communication and involvement in the everyday. The basic underlying concepts associated with it had emerged by the early twentieth century. Sumner, writing in 1906, captures the primary dynamics in this excerpt from his influential work *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*:

“Loyalty to the group, sacrifice for it, hatred and contempt for outsiders, brotherhood within, warlikeness without,— all grow together, common products of the same situation. ... Men of an others-group are outsiders with concepts associated with it had emerged by the early twentieth century. Whose ancestors the ancestors of the we-group waged war. Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn.”⁵

“The community, on a smaller scale, developed its own basis of functionality and collective thought, the measure of our rationality determines the degree of vividness with which we appreciate the needs of other life, the extent to which we become conscious of the of the real character of our own motives and impulses, the ability to harmonize conflicting impulses in our own life and in society, and the capacity to choose adequate means for approval ends

Man is endowed by nature with organic relations to his fellow men; and natural impulse prompts him to consider the needs of others even when they compete with his own. Reason is not the sole basis of moral virtue in man. His social impulses are more deeply rooted than his rational life.”⁶

Much of this based on the political and socioeconomic factors that were existent through the individuals who were included in the community. My hypothesis is that today that real outside world has been divided into sub-cultures that are highly affected by the media, the speed of information dissemination, and the advancements in technology. This, in part, has through the internet and social media created a pseudo community and a pseudo-Self that is in large part guided by algorithms, a new unreal outer world that exists within the real outer world, or to many can be seen as a positive option to the real outer world.

In my point-of-view, the new sub-culture, ‘the internet/social media’ has become the new outer world, although the communication is not a dialogue, but a one-way transference of information from the internet/social media to the individual, and the individual then feeds in information about him or herself. In the real outer world, there was the inherent ability for a response, not just a one-way systemic. Research from 2015 reported that globally, users spent 22% of their online time on social networks, likely fueled by the availability of smartphones. As of 2023, as many as 4.76 billion people used social media some 59% of the global population.⁷

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/psychology_of_the_self_identity#cite_note_e-3.

5 https://wikipedia.org/wiki/social_identity_theory#cite_note-14 : A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals.

6 Wikipedia: Moral Man and Immoral Society (Reinhold Niebuhr-1932) Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics*, Charles Scribner's Sons (1932) - pp. 27-28.

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/social_media#cite_note_Sterling-2016-30.

Cultural Media Theory focuses on the reciprocal relationship between media and culture, emphasizing how media both reflects and shapes societal values, identities, and power dynamics. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality, this theory examines how media representations construct and perpetuate cultural norms.^{8 9 10}

„This chapter explores how media has historically shaped cultural narratives, from the idealized portrayals of family life in mid-twentieth-century television to the commodification of culture through advertising. In the digital era, platforms like Instagram and Netflix amplify these dynamics, offering both opportunities for cultural diversity and risks of homogenization. Cultural Media Theory provides critical tools for analyzing the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sustainability within media narratives, encouraging readers to think critically about representation and identity in a media-saturated world“¹¹

The pseudo-outer world is being processed in these media by algorithms...in finality by a machine, The vision being given is a utopian world where the desired perfection of the Self becomes the driving force for the individual, based on what is presented visually on the internet/social media. The desire is to have and be what one has shown and which is inferred to be what they can aim for in their everyday lives. This becomes the desire to attain the most on all levels. From my point-of-view this has also created a voyeuristic consumer lifestyle...but where is the reality in all this? When perfection is unattainable, depression sets in, then isolationism and a pulling back from society as it is...the final journey can lead to nihilism, nihilism driven by narcissism.

To overcome individual “unsatiated appetite”, as Durkheim says,

“...society must have a “general will” or “collective consciousness” to which people must can commit... The collective consciousness is the one thing that society needs in order to survive. Without it, society will become ill and eventually perish... The collective consciousness... does allow us a basis for sharing our awareness of the world.”¹²

According to my experiences with its members, in today's younger generation there are signs that the acceptance of what has been the societal status quo (the norms based on the collective consciousness) and the definition of the Self in society/community (as it has been perceived and lived previously) is changing quickly due to a loss of dialogue, the loss of the established collective consciousness, and what could be stated to be the loss of the true Self. The true Self having been established from the individual's first existence and their ongoing interaction with the outer world. This interaction being represented as the dialogue between the Self and the society/community as it has affected everyday life. Since the Renaissance at the doorway to modernity, the idea underlying these connections have been called ‘Mundus Humanus’, a world sui generis being made up, shaped, and kept alive by humans.¹³ This has been taken over by the internet/social media, the loss of an internal definition of the Self, the development of perfectionistic desires/needs.

In today's voyeuristic capitalism, this is taken over in part with the aid of influencers as they fill the vacuum created by the loss of the established collective consciousness that has been seemingly filled by market driven forces (of which the phenomenon of ‘influencers’ is a part of). This is reinforced by today's realities in everyday thinking based on the search by the individual for their true-identity. Going back in history Aristotle had stated: “That knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.”¹⁴ In turn this affects the

8 Baudrillard - *Agonie Des Realen*, 1978 24f.; 35-40; 56f., to Model and Technique, Merve Verlag Berlin.

9 New Dark Age Technology And The End Of Future @jamesbridle, 2018 Verso, London. 10. Richard Sennett 2006 - *The Culture Of The New Capitalism*, Yale University Press.

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12 Durkheim, in Kenneth (op.cit.): 108- From the article *The Loss of Collective Consciousness In Society* - Grant F. Raynham - *Urban Eidos*, Issue 4, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.62582/UE4001p>

13 Thomas Leinkauf, *Die Philosophie des Humanismus und der Renaissance*, Page 93, 2020, Verlag C.H.Beck.

14 (<https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2192.Aristotle>), March 8, 2026.

common conscious of the community and society. The internal definition of the Self can only take place if there is a dialogue with other humans, i.e. with the community the individual is a part of. As was stated by Ruth Bader Ginsburg (U.S. Supreme Court Justice 1993 to 2020; March 15th, 2023):

“Fight for the things that you care about. But do it in a way that will lead others to join. Whatever you choose to do, leave tracks. That means don’t do it just for yourself.”

This is crucial. As well: a), there is a vacuum; b), a market-driven mechanism run by a machine takes over and offers unreal portrayals of artificial idols (the stylized influencer) to go after. This is leading to isolationism, an increasing nihilistic view of life, and a need to leave the city as a structure of lifestyle (whether this is a utopic concept or not), and in cases a desire to return to nature (not in the essence of the Green Movement), but in a want to redefine community in nature (whether this is a niche conceptualization has yet to be established). The desire to throw away the shackles of urban life, a want to create a new humanity, a so-called new freedom...but how realistic is this?

Where will be the new Self and societal identity? How will this be seen in the established *Conditio Humana* (the fundamental and inescapable conditions that frame human existence as it has moved through the ages, that encompasses its limitations and strength)? This is in particular holds true for today’s younger generation. There needs to be greater communication with the younger generation to get their views on their everyday life perceptions, not based on the views of established norms from community and society from older generations... a new and healthy dialogue is needed.

Identity in the past has been based on an internal perception of the Self and the ongoing dialogue between the Self and the outer world and vice versa. As a humanist conception, this has in the past been the cornerstone upon which the *Conditio Humana* was perpetuated through dialogue delivering collective consciousness and a societal/communal identity.¹⁵ In turn one sees a relationship seem to develop between the Self, community and society...the real basis of culture creating and driving a collective consciousness. What is the source of this movement away from collective consciousness, and what will be the end game after the loss of a humanist approach?

“Information online often lacks nuance, making it difficult for Gen Z to discern between truth and mis-/ disinformation. Rather than put in the effort to verify information online, many respond to this dilemma by disengaging entirely. These individuals feel as if they are living in a post truth world where any statement can be backed up with ‘evidence’ through a search online. An excess of contradictory information can cause individuals to feel cognitively burdened and ineffective at processing information, negatively impacting their confidence in understanding the world around them.”¹⁶

Yet this may only be the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Collective consciousness can create a defined identity as is stated per below.

“When people come together, transformations do occur. All we must have is a collective consciousness, as it is human need, towards creating a better mankind. Collective consciousness is “baked into” the architecture of the human mind—it is at the foundation of a uniquely human psychology, wherein homo sapiens have the intent and the capacity to cooperate with beings that are living and dead, human and otherwise.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Leinkauf (op.cit.): 93f.

¹⁶ In 2022 Daniel Siegel (December 16th) in an article in *Insight from The Global Network on Extremism and Technology*.

¹⁷ Gary Shteynberg, *Journal Of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 34, Issue 4, p.678-686. Published July 2024 under *The Psychology of Collective Consciousness*.

Yet there is a defined shift occurring. It is manifested in the thinking of the younger generation.

“We are witnessing an enormous shift of collective consciousness throughout the world. We are at the precipice of great transformation within our culture and government.”¹⁸

For the sake of remaining human and following a humanist approach, we cannot just have a passing interest in it. We need to define a direction to a new identity based on a new collective consciousness, and a re-definition of the Self. The re-definition would have to venture away from the basic, established concepts of Durkheim and Jung. There are other relevant theories before and after, amongst others such as Tönnies, Freud, Hegel and Renaissance writers to attempt to bring forth a definition. A definition based on a new humanist approach, considering the changes in the outer world via the internet/social media, which has totally upended the basic past's delivered conceptualizations of the Self. This is now a brave new world based on isolationism and perfection (as viewed through the internet/social media), resulting in depression, and an opting out of the established societal/communal/city culture and dialogue related communication...a journey that is leading to nihilism and being driven by narcissism. Yet there may be two opposing forces working here, isolationism/nihilism, versus what can be seen as tendencies already at work that show a need for orientation provided by the utopic presence of influencers (who are often idolized), and the Self bubble still expressing a need for community/citizenship. They are utopian in literal terms, they are located in a non-place of a constructed, idolized identity. Which would mean in prolongation that the new collective conscious, as emerging at the moment, is the one of the isolated Self and could be one trajectory towards a near future. The identities offered by them are just constructs, artifacts. Opposed to a real human identity that is generated by and developed through the communication with community members.

What is the real storyline on the new levels of isolationism and nihilism in the younger generation today, in part driven by the internet/social media (where reports have it that youth is spending up to 12 hours a day living in this new outer internet/social media world)? Self-isolationism can be conscious or subconscious and sees a withdrawal from interaction with others. It can be driven by depression, low self-esteem and anxiety.

Narcissism comes from a need for admiration and the inability to deal with the feelings of others and sensitivity to criticism. Therefore, if a pattern starts with isolationism, it can advance to narcissism as the individual lashes out due to low-esteem and their sensitivity to criticism. In part as a protective device. It is always easier to blame others: community and society, or even the existent real world. Is narcissism derived from the new Self, and the dysfunctional new outer world driving society/community to near extinction through the individual ceasing his or her desire to even be a part of the real world?

Years ago, Durkheim stated:

“One cannot remain so absorbed in contemplation of emptiness without being increasingly attracted to it. In vain one bestows on it the name of infinity; this does not change its nature, when one feels such pleasure in non-existence, one's inclination can be completely satisfied only by completely ceasing to exist.”¹⁹

This is a theory, looking at Durkheim's view from the past, that seems to be a vision from Durkheim to today's society. Today, we really have to take into consideration a younger generation that looks to perfectionism, that can in turn lead to isolationism, and even further to nihilism. Today's society has gone far beyond the bounds of Durkheim's thinking. We must remember that in his time there was no internet, no social media enveloping everyday life. Since the 19th century there was the reality of certain groups of individuals within society pulling back from a collective consciousness that moved away from Self-identity with the existent outer world. This would have been seen as a rebellion to the existent community and societal structure, and the desire to envision a new society, such as living entirely in nature, escaping from the city as it was. It was a

18 Zachary Quinto – AZ Quotes [azquotes.com/author/11994 Zachary Quinto](https://azquotes.com/author/11994_Zachary_Quinto) (Biography/Personal notes www.imdb.com)

19 Goodreads, <https://goodreads.com> Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Original book: *Suicide: Etude De Sociologie* (1897). Ancienne Librairie Germer Bailliere et Cie. English Translation 1952 Routledge & Kegan Paul.

utopian move from William Morris to Ebenezer Howard's green city, to the Monte Verita Movement, to Ernest Callenbach's Ecotopia, to today's attempts to bring nature back into the city.

There was seemingly a desire to redefine their Self away from the existent Self, as well as the existent outer world. These breakaway groups did not affect the ongoing communal society of the time, had a short-lived existence and did not affect the ongoing communal and societal agendas of the times. The groundwork for this escapism and the current instability in the Self and collective consciousness was already laid in the conditions of industrialization. The German sociologist Tönnies (19th century) stated: "Industrialization, the mass metropolis and modern life turned community into anonymous society."²⁰

Tönnies statement reflects on the basis of industrialization and shifts in the Self, community and society. The pre-industrial lifestyle was more dependent on simplicity, the family unit and the concept of the communal lifestyle. Industrialization moved this to 'the firm' controlling life, and the development of community around industry. Therefore, the humanity that existed in pre industrialization was starting to be lost. The Self was in transition, as was the existent outer world, a quantum shift in the human condition (*Conditio Humana*). Maybe human nature began to reveal it's a quantum shift in the human condition that caused the loss of community. Maybe this illustrates that through time, even with collective consciousness, that in the thoughts and perceptions of the Self one can feel isolation from collective thought and hence alienate oneself from the outer world. It is possible this is the point of no return to the thought status quo, and maybe where the search for a new collective consciousness begins. In other words, it could be stated as to be the point where the isolated thoughts of a few may take on a broader acceptance within the mass of society and subsequently could become the new norm, the new identity and the new collective consciousness. This is how 'cultural streams' develop and work, as was related recently by Dr. Ulrich Gehmann/The Ideal Spaces Foundation. The question is will the forces of the established identity and collective conscious counter this new identity and collective consciousness? Could it be the new conceptualization of identity could underlie a utopian fantasy beyond attainable reality? Could this be embodied in collective group narcissism. Narcissism is not a new phenomenon in society, yet what seems to be developing is a new narcissistic view on the individual, community and societal level, which could be seen as a very concerning trend. This deserves a fuller investigation and could be the basis of further investigation.

Could we add that present day Isolationism, leading to depression, collective consciousness/societal/communal rejection paths and towards nihilism is due to in part the Self's narcissistic personality driving the individual from looking inside unconsciously? Therefore, the new Self then looks to the outer world, today that having been replaced by the internet/social media and what could be seen as the new voyeuristic capitalism. It seems like the real Self and pre-existing collective consciousness is at its end game. It is being replaced with nihilism and narcissism and that is becoming the new identity and collective consciousness, in fact dooming what has been present for eons in society, community and citizenship. This is the first time in civilized history that a complete new outer world has been created, as is being seen through current technology and the internet/social media. We are just beginning to live in the reality of this new outer world and how it will develop and envelope community and the Self in the future. Is there the potential that the future could become a void... an end game with no visible solution? A new beginning based on the nihilistic and narcissistic internalizations of the new generation...or are there the few in the younger generation ready to take on the mantle of leadership into this new unknown?

Will there be a split in society as to the direction and actual concepts of how community and society will progress, will there be a new status quo, or a shift that will allow for the inclusion of new norms and a modified identity?

Traditional utopias up to the present day relied on community/society. The new utopia of today relies on the individual, their so-called societal 'atom' from Libertarian philosophy to today's social media. This is a very important juxtaposition. Utopia is for community if this is no longer the case, and if (an assumption) utopia is needed as a guiding light to motivate the will for social improvement, then society is over since the idea of

20 Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft Abhandlung des Communismus und des Socialismus als empirische Culturformen*, Leipzig; Fues's Verlag (R. Reiland).



improvement is over. Improvement, in particular, the 'utopian' one, has to assume the existence – now, and in the future – of a community. A 'private' utopia one only for the individual, is no utopia, but just a narcissistic fulfilment. The commonality being the individual getting omnipotent (the power of the Self) and is defined by the individual. Therefore, that individual becomes the 'user' consumer of the world. The new utopia is not utopia, but Schlaraffia a consequently individual-centred promise of maximal fulfilment of individual needs. It equals a society of consumers where community plays no role. Man as a myth of the world as app, as a quarry for the individual's application. Cultural/religious heritage becomes transformed into post-humanism. In reality many of the young generation today from academia label themselves as 'post-humanists'. At least it can be stated in younger academia that there is a cultural stream – woke, post-humanist, feminist for example. In the broad view how will these changes be implemented, if at all, and what will be the effects on community, society and citizenship? If not included how will this affect the social, economic and political identity and collective consciousness of the younger generation? The new technology and its implementation by the individual needs wealth and unprecedented power for these individuals to live on in their new Self bubble. This needs to be driven by the large supra-individual architecture of a networking organization (as architecture is not only buildings). That is considered the old idea of order: of the state, the city and of citizenship. The social media are the new well-designed architecture that have a largess beyond individual influence, in having a societal effect. It could be asked how to counter their influence? The answer maybe they are the ones who deliver social media in turn delivering the pseudo-outer world, driving the desires and needs of the follower. These needs are not the genuine needs of the followers, but the profit-driven needs of companies. Yet the isolationism, depression and finally nihilism this could bring on the individual is a defining process that we are in the midst of trying to understand presently. (see for instance James Bridle 2018, *New Dark Age* Verso, London)

Internet and social media are today essentially the pseudo outer world, they have become an intrinsic part of today's culture. Yet it seems the Self, in particular, in our younger generation is being transformed from the imagery and written words of the social media presence in our lives. This new pseudo outer world became the relevant world in parallel to the old outer world, and as a utopia in the literal sense, its epitome is the cloud, a new immaterial reality of nebulous possibilities.

What is being presented is a utopic view of consumerism at the high end of the spectrum. This new utopia does not need citizenship, or a feeling of belonging to a particular city. This in turn drives a need in the Self-perception of the younger generation, the need to be perfect as being presented in the electronic media. Therefore, subverting the pre-existent Self with a new Self based on a newly inhaled set of normative thoughts, thoughts that individuals following social media accept as their new reality... a new outer world. One could question that could this not be the new true dictatorship, where the dialogue stops before allowing communication with one's peer group and society itself, the pre-existent outer world). As stated, this new world does not need real cities or citizenship anymore.

With a thank you to Dr. Ulrich Gehmann.

Rewilding the *animal* who lives *with* the city

Belonging through growing

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Abstract – A sense of belonging is declining within Western cities. This is occurring due to a hyper individualism produced through neoliberalism, which is isolating people, not only from one another, but also from the other-than- and more-than-human nature, of which we are a part of. This isolation can impact both individuals and communities through thwarting meaningful connections and increasing experiences of loneliness, which are detrimental to people's being and belonging. Through and *with* this creative-relational inquiry and commentary I explore how we can stay *with* the trouble of loneliness and respond to it through encounters *with* community gardens. Community gardens are a growing third place within Western societies that offer affective environments, which support participants' wellbeing, belonging and interconnectivity, as well as transformational encounters, which support social action and justice. Through my focus on community gardens, I argue our attention needs to be drawn to the co-creation of free, accessible, and available affective environments in order to respond to loneliness and the trouble of its affects. To support my inquiry into the shifting sense of belonging *with* cities I offer extracts of reflective writing focused on my befriending of Edinburgh to highlight the more-than-human process and assemblages involved in (en)countering loneliness.

"[P]art of the trouble seemed to be that where I was wasn't anywhere at all."

(Olivia Laing¹)

Beginnings

Where am I?-I walk, alone but haunted, pass closed gardens, open shops, and streams of distant people-I recognise the castle cast in sodium yellow-memories creep and crawl in me, alongside me-I walk with new beginnings and tendrils searching, desiring futures-a flow of lights cut the darkness-where am I?

With Edinburgh I write *into* my experiences of the Western city. My *I* is not singular or fixed, but a dynamic configuration of selves, which is navigating personal life events and professional changes. As I write *into* my experiences I write *with* the liminality of

1 Laing, 2016, p.14

my current situations. Through this commentary, by undertaking a creative-relational inquiry, I attend to my encounters, seeking a way through the unfolding processes of (dis)connection, of place making, of hauntings, and desires, *leaning* into co-becoming *with* the city, and illuminating the multiple dialogues involved in staying *with* and responding to loneliness. Creative-relational inquiry is an approach that encounters the unfolding and unpredictability of opening-up *with* events, and animates the relational dynamics, processes and influences that take shape through the inquiry². The *I* that has undertaken this creative-relational inquiry offers a particular perspective shaped by my situated embodied encounters.

Through exploring and then writing *with* Edinburgh, I stumbled upon a community garden, which co-created an opening for responding *with* to the call for this issue of *Urban Eidos*³. An opening not only influenced by my research interests into the role of belonging in individual, community and ecological wellbeing, but my own search for belonging and accompanying feelings of loneliness in a new city. A response which begins with exploring the shifting shape of belonging in cities, before exploring the (in) visible hand of neoliberal capitalism on upsetting places of belonging. I follow with a brief discussion on wellbeing and then consider the role of community gardens as an affective place where being well and a sense of belonging unfolds. I conclude by proposing rewilding our inner and outer worlds is an act of social action and justice, which improves our sense of belonging as individuals *with* the city.

Zoon Politikon

The *animal* is me, it is you, it is us. The *animal* is the 'nature'⁴ we so often forget we are. The *animal* is a pack animal, social. Rewilding is called for as the *animal* has become bounded by capitalism, a resource to be squeezed in pursuit of accumulation, and tethered to production and consumerism⁵. The *animal* has become displaced and disembodied, surviving in non-places, in a digital ether, seeking a voice, answers, belonging⁶. *With* implies the implicit relationality that has (re)made our cities and is co-creating the onsetting voids neoliberalism brings to our cities, estranging us animals from one another, as places become once again space, plagued by an absence of meaning⁷. *With* compels us to rewild the *animal* (and the city) through the multiple and dynamic relational assemblages we are part of and their affects. Rewilding requires folding us *animals* back *with* all nature and unfolding co-created places of more-than-human belonging.

I walk-searching to understand this city-single tweets alarm calling-an extinct volcano dominates the horizon-a large park-empty but full-circled by walkers, runners and cyclists-I look out beyond the cityscape to find my bearings-I continue to walk alone-circling-my eyes linger on a small community garden within the park-I slow down and smile-a little place of manicured wildness.

Donna Haraway⁸ famously called for us to 'stay with the trouble' in order to be present in our dynamic and unfolding more-than-human assemblages. But what is 'the trouble' that we are required to stay with? The trouble may look a lot like the 'emptying of the city' and what that means for active citizenship, as this issue calls attention to. This emptying of the city, is this really true? For, the city is still home to residents, businesses, shops and third places⁹ to meet and be in. Or is it more a shifting of these third

2 Wyatt, 2019; Gillott, 2026

3 See: <https://urban-eidos.com/call-for-contributions/>

4 I consider nature as encompassing human and other-than-human species (e.g., animals, plants), whilst recognising nature represents individual entities, as well as the environments which are co-created through the dynamic interactions between different entities, co-creating multiple natures (Castree, 2005; Whatmore, 2002). When I use nature in the text, I include human nature.

5 Moore, 2016

6 Paul, 2025

7 Bogue & Ouillon, 2023; Finlay, 2019; Haraway, 2016

8 Haraway, 2016

9 Third places are informal and inclusive (public or commercial) spaces which offer people opportunities to socialise and develop community. They offer an alternative place to home (first place) or work (second place) (Oldenburg, 1999).

places? A movement away from in-person happenstances and happenings to (curated) digital meet ups. For, where do our everyday connections take place? What is happening to the social fabric of our lives? And perhaps that is the emptying, the loss of in-person connection. An absence of companionship whilst being surrounded. So, the trouble may be isolation and its shadow, loneliness¹⁰. The trouble is the affect of this shadow¹¹.

A weight hangs to me-cloaks me in a familiar absence-where are they?-people-I seek comfort-I turn to sugar and fermented plants-but I remain inside-singular-disembodied-disconnected-alone in this city.

Olivia Laing¹² through their exploration of loneliness in the city stayed with their trouble, co-creating through their encounters with specific artists and art an awareness of what it is to be lonely and a sense of belonging, not only with New York City, but as importantly with their self. Edinburgh, is the city I am trying to befriend. As a transient resident I come and go, with each trip for work I open myself up to (dis)connection as I explore *with* the city. These trips are coloured by my sense that I am alone here, despite being a frequent visitor and with an eye on building a possible home here. This is reflected in my exploring *with* the city as I stay in different areas. However, my stays are in hotels and my exploration by foot is an individual endeavour. I'm aware the social connections I desire will take time to build. I reach out through work, but opportunities are limited elsewhere due to my pattern of work and my trepidation in making connections (e.g., through a running group), which I fear may remain fleeting and leave me feeling more alone amongst people. As such, I enter into my encounters *with* Edinburgh not only alone, but already carrying a sense of loneliness.

In the dark I turn towards animals-a well-loved dog first-I face my hauntings-the castle-I step away from the main thoroughfares-I find The Black Cat-but I do not enter, alone-I hold it for a special anniversary-I start to join the dots-the next day a walk along the canal and through parks-I orientate myself in the new.

My sense of loneliness affects how I perceive and experience Edinburgh, specifically where and how I reach out for connection. Early on that connection began *with* a statue of a dog, Greyfriars Bobby, a rubbed nose - golden, known for his loyalty to his human companion. On my second day in Edinburgh, I sought him out, ever since he has become part of my commute. With Bobby I became entangled: drawn to my memories of two cats, who saved two lives; with the people who stand, smile and take photos of Bobby; with the cars I dodge as I give space to the smiling strangers. We remain unknown to one another, but connected. An anchor formed and there was a shift, I was not alone here. My first line of flight¹³ in my developing constellation *with* Edinburgh.

The green spaces called-I planned my route-locked gate after locked gate-I circled the metal spiked fences-this privatisation of space-nine in total over three ks-I'm left questioning could this city be home?

Meanwhile, there are also multiple economic, political and social power dynamics which can thwart our belonging, these include the ongoing privatisation of public space¹⁴. This privatisation of space can control who belongs, what behaviours are tolerated and thus the accessibility and availability of public third spaces for all citizens¹⁵. This social and self judgement regarding who belongs and is tolerated can limit the ways in which people express themselves and suppress particular identities¹⁶. The threat of self-surveillance from unseen power dynamics requires resisting, if there are to be third places for all. Such resistance necessitates a willingness to learn, to question, and

10 I consider loneliness as an absence of meaningful social relations that provide emotional and social connections (Morrison and Smith, 2018).

11 These include a wide range of mental and physical health impacts, increased mortality, and decreased social participation and connection (Becker et al., 2021; Bower et al., 2023; Corcoran and Marshall, 2018).

12 Laing, 2016

13 Lines of flight are formed from the relations between actants, which can enhance an assemblage through new understandings, meanings and movement or deplete an assemblage through oppressing it (Deleuze and Guattari, 2016).

14 Atkinson, 2013; Garrett, 2015

15 Carmona, 2021

16 Parr, 1997

to act, as well as a movement towards a view of kinship that is multi-species¹⁷. Through recognising the other-than- and more-than-human natures and our relations *with* them, which co-creates our lives, our communities, and our cities we can move towards a co-becoming that places care and response-ability at the heart of our communities; as well as challenge the multiple economic, political and social power dynamics which are the persuasive forces involved in the increasing estrangement within our cities¹⁸.

Coffee, music, and smiles-Blackford hill and a rainbow framing Arthur's Seat-a rush of memories-a remembering smile-a record store and snippets of human connection-we walk and talk about nature therapy, circling former meadows-waterways and lone figures-bird calls and a search for a robin-solidarity, walking the talk and floating tears-opening myself up and becoming visible-a pint with Bobby-and a continuing search for city cats.

Through my ongoing exploration *with* Edinburgh, I'm co-becoming *with* my human, other-than- and more-than-human assemblages as I seek a balm to the oppressive affects of loneliness on my sense of self and wellbeing. I stay with the trouble. Staying with the trouble involves recognising how my personal and professional circumstances influence my experiences *with* Edinburgh, but also how I am part of multiple assemblages which are influenced by other people's choices too, as well as by multiple economic, political and social power dynamics. Through staying, I am slowly co-creating a sense of community and belonging. A co-created belonging which began *with* the more-than-human as I tentatively reached out through an entanglement of emotions, memories, and desires, to a statue of a well-loved dog; co-creating a sense of safety, to support further opening up and sharing of stories with colleagues. It is through opening myself *with* Edinburgh that my sense of loneliness has decreased, which is further affecting how I perceive Edinburgh and myself *with* Edinburgh. This process involves a bringing together in relation a collection of gossamer threads, *with* which I am weaving myself into. I hold loosely the fragility of it, whilst recognising it also grounds me. Consequently, I am becoming less a stranger and estranged from the city and more an entangled and active citizen.

My thoughts return to the manicured wildness and I am reminded of the role of community gardens, where I have found participants are supported to stay *with* and explore their trouble(s) in a more-than-human third place¹⁹. Here, reciprocal relationships with nature can be developed, which supports a rewilding of people's inner and outer worlds through, in part, a recognition of, and living, an interconnected, complex, and dynamic life with all species²⁰. Before considering how the *Zoon Politikon*²¹ is rewilded *with* these places, I first turn to our evolving Western urban landscapes.

(In)sane Environments

The cities which we inhabit are human-made spaces, which through their design affords practices that support people's sense of belonging, preventing loneliness²². However, the economic and political dynamics informing how cities are designed may also reduce the opportunities for sociality. Meanwhile, our sense of belonging is also influenced by this wider economic, political and social environment which we inhabit, an environment dominated by capitalism and its hyperindividualising offspring, neoliberalism²³. Here, neoliberal capitalism encompasses an economic system, a political ideology and a societal order, which produces specific cultural norms and practices²⁴. These norms and practices are influenced by firstly, the violent separation of humans from the other-than-human nature and secondly, the role of 'free markets' in determining how people choose to live²⁵.

17 Haraway, 2016

18 Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Goldman, 2026

19 Harrod, 2024

20 Totton, 2021

21 Social animal or the animal who lives in the city

22 Bower et al., 2023

23 Fraser, 2023; Matthews, 2019

24 Fraser, 2023; Harvey, 2020a; Adams et al., 2019

25 Fraser, 2023; Harvey 2020a; 2020b; Moore, 2016

Neoliberal capitalism relates to nature²⁶ as a (free and self-replenishing) resource, providing the material for production and a (self-repairing) sink for the waste produced²⁷. This exploitation of nature was enabled through the Western separation of humans from nature. Through this cultural and social construct, other-than- and more-than-human nature is positioned as external to and separate from human culture and society, and imagined in its purest form as wilderness, an un-peopled nature²⁸. Yet, it is through cultural practices and understandings that other-than- and more-than-human nature are modified to produce various natures, which are also considered landscapes, including those considered natural (e.g., mountains, forests and rivers) and built (e.g., cities, farmland)²⁹. This separation of humans from other-than- and more-than-human nature has also been established as being detrimental to human wellbeing³⁰.

Human wellbeing is also negatively impacted through how society's surplus is not democratically distributed, but instead left to the free market³¹. Society's surplus is the social capacities and energies that are available beyond what is required to live, and concerns how people balance their labour with their leisure time, for themselves, their family (including future generations), and community. However, neoliberalism views individuals as self-interested and being in competition with each other. This valuing of competition and self-interest underpins an emphasis on individual freedom and self-determination in living 'a good life', which can reduce social participation and solidarity through promoting hyperindividualism³². Meanwhile, neoliberalism also premises that free markets and trade guarantee individual freedoms. However, individual freedoms have instead been eroded through expanding corporate entities levying their positions to influence economic and political decisions to further deregulate the markets in order to protect and grow their interests³³. The continuing replacement of state interventions with state apparatuses which facilitate neoliberalism, alongside hyperindividualism, leaves individuals and communities at the whim of free markets and at risk of abandonment. As such, is it surprising that society's surplus, instead of being allocated via collective processes to benefit all³⁴, is being devoured by institutions and individuals (blindly) following the doctrine of free markets towards a promised freedom?

Neoliberalism's hyperindividualism unravels the social fabric by disconnecting people from each other and increasing social isolation and loneliness³⁵. In other words, loneliness is a sane response to the insane environment produced by neoliberal capitalism. Loneliness as a response to an alienating environment is not new, but is thought to have emerged during the nineteenth century due to the rapid societal transformation that occurred through Western industrialisation³⁶. A societal transformation that was accompanied by increasing urbanisation, reorganised ways of living at home and work, opened up mobilities and communications, as well as instilled values of individualism and self-reliance. As such, loneliness is a lived experience affected by the prevailing socio-environmental context, and shifts in these socio-environments can counter loneliness.

Third places such as libraries, cafes, parks, community centres, and public squares can offer ameliorating experiences and act as an antidote to the alienation that accompanies hyperindividualism. Third places focus on non-demanding sociability, providing opportunities for people to form connections, participate in activities, develop friendships, receive and give emotional and personal support, and provide space for emotional refuge and personal reflection³⁷. The relationships formed through third places are valued as they are typically non-hierarchical and caring, providing empathic, non-judgemental, and authentic interactions, which value each other's lived experienc-

26 Including human nature (Moore, 2016)

27 Fraser, 2023

28 Castree, 2001; Cronon, 1996

29 Castree, 2011; Mason and Riding, 2023

30 Richardson, 2023; Totton, 2021

31 Fraser, 2023

32 Adams et al., 2019; Bettache, 2026

33 Harvey 2020a

34 Fraser, 2023

35 Adams et al., 2019; Becker et al., 2021; Bettache, 2026; Harvey, 2020a; 2020b; Matthews, 2019

36 Popp, 2023

37 Biglin, 2021; Finlay et al., 2019; Glover and Parry, 2009

es, enhancing people's quality of life. As such, through third places people can feel included in their community and develop a sense of belonging. However, governmental policies, such as austerity, which seek to reduce public spending, as well prioritise the free market, supports private interests (e.g., property developers) over public good³⁸. These neoliberal actions can lead to cuts to public services and the privatisation of public space³⁹, eroding the provision of freely accessible third spaces.

Finally, neoliberal capitalism, alongside alienating us from one another, also constrains people's actions and expressions. This occurs in public spheres, through the privatisation and control of public spaces, where people's actions are controlled either via specific regulations or social rules, reducing spontaneity and enforcing consumption⁴⁰. Neoliberal capitalism's stranglehold on how we live is also detrimental to people's intra- and interpersonal relationships, including with other-than- and more-than-human nature. Nick Totton⁴¹ proposes we have become disembodied from ourselves and disconnected from our internal locus of evaluation, through losing trust in our own sensations, feelings, and experiences as a guide for living well. A disembodiment that is founded on the separation of humans from other-than- and more-than-human nature. This othering of other-than- and more-than-human nature involves defining other-than- and more-than-human nature as wild, savage and something to be mastered, and humans as domesticated and civilised, which constrains human expression and set patterns of (ab)normal behaviour⁴². Due to being asked to control ourselves through social norms and practices (which creates external loci of evaluation) we can fear spontaneity, creativity and self-trust because they are perceived as forms of loss of control. Thus, maintaining control over our expressions supports us to belong and not to be rejected. However, the hyperindividualism present in our societies suggest this belonging is not authentic, but instead leads us (blindly) to the trouble. Due to becoming dissociated from our experiences, producing a detached and avoidant society, which is expressed through loneliness, and is detrimental to our sense of being well and belonging⁴³.

Totton⁴⁴ proposes to counter this isolating dissociation we need to rewild our inner and outer worlds, (re)connecting to ourselves as relational beings in complex more-than-human assemblages. Rewilding involves embodying our unique selves as spontaneous, creative and trustworthy and (re)connecting to our internal locus of evaluation, whilst relinquishing external loci of evaluation. Rewilding is supported by (re)connecting to and seeking to live in harmony with other-than- and more-than-human nature. Through these (re)connections we recognise our interdependence. Totton proposes this de-centring of ourselves whilst it can be both frightening and liberating, moves us towards belonging and collective actions in support of social and ecological justice. However, rewilding is centred on the individual to move individually and collectively towards interdependency, it does not tackle neoliberal capitalism directly. Instead, rewilding proposes a process to reconfigure how we relate and respond to the oppression and violence of neoliberal capitalism person by person, community by community, in order to co-create interdependent, equitable and flourishing more-than-human societies. I now turn to how the defining and situating of a good life can support or thwart rewilding.

Detoxifying Wellbeing

To stay with the trouble⁴⁵, we need to understand what it means to be well in order to respond to the ongoing affects present among the *animals* who live *with* the city. Being well often invokes a sense of living a good life, which begets the question, what does a good life look like?

Flourishing wellbeing is often equated to a person⁴⁶ being able to attain a high satis-

38 Bogue and Ouillon, 2023

39 Bogue and Ouillon, 2023; Imrie, 2018

40 Carmona, 2021; Imrie, 2018

41 Totton, 2021

42 Totton, 2021

43 Rogers, 1961; Totton, 2021

44 Totton, 2021

45 The affects of loneliness

46 An individual is often equated to a family unit comprising of two adults and children

faction in a range of components, including financial, educational, health and personal⁴⁷. Here wellbeing is promoted as being an obtainable, fixed and having an endpoint. This approach endorses an individualised and managed self that through continuing self-improvements, achievements and accumulation, 'a good life' will be attained and a state of happiness reached⁴⁸. Encountering unavoidable distress, disappointments, and loss is written out of this managed self, specifically the significance of meaning making from these events⁴⁹. The individualised self is manipulated by neoliberalism, through centring behavioural change on individuals and by promoting a competitive and comparative drive that further fragments communities and increases inequality⁵⁰. As such, this individualisation of wellbeing is toxic to the person and to society, as the responsibility for being well is isolated in the individual with the negative impact of structural inequalities experienced by a person constructed as personal failings rather than due to economic, political, societal and cultural dynamics⁵¹.

To detoxify wellbeing requires firstly, framing wellbeing as an emergent, dynamic and relational process affected by the spatial context of a person's situation and their affective responses to the place and the actants involved in co-creating that place⁵². Hence, wellbeing is not just an individualised endeavour, rather a co-created process, which is an entanglement of human and other-than-human relationships, more-than-human places, a person's values and meanings, societal expectations, cultural meanings, and governmental policies. The interplay of all these factors can influence a person's wellbeing through affecting their capabilities, choices, and actions. As such, a person's wellbeing can flux depending on a person's situation and the shifting values and meanings attributed within that context⁵³. Therefore, wellbeing does not necessarily stay stable overtime. Subsequently, recognising wellbeing as being formed through complex and dynamic assemblages shifts responsibility away from individual acquisition of resources to focusing on how economic, political, social and spatial aspects affect people's wellbeing⁵⁴. By understanding wellbeing as an emergent, dynamic and relational process, a person's difficulties are not viewed as personal failures, but as the actions of a person surviving difficult circumstances, including social conditioning and societal inequalities⁵⁵.

Secondly, a good life involves a process of co-becoming, which is a movement towards living authentically, encompassing meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling actions *with* and within community relations⁵⁶. Focusing on co-becoming shifts the focus away from an attainment of 'goods' towards the development of a way of being. A way of being which involves an improving self-awareness, an increasing self-trust, and an openness to experience and living each moment fully can support a person to be adaptable, creative, and constructive in their responses to situations⁵⁷. This supports people to flourish as an authentic unique individual and socially – "meeting the needs and challenges of these relationships in interdependence and solidarity"⁵⁸. As such, within a good life a person moves towards autonomy and belonging as an authentic person *with* and within active and fluid more-than-human assemblages. A good life is a (re)wild(ed) life. Consequently, in order to not just stay, but to respond to the trouble involves exploring the affects of these more-than-human-assemblages and the factors involved in co-creating beneficial lines of flight, which supports a rewilded good life.

47 Atkinson, 2013

48 White, 2017

49 Craib, 1994

50 Atkinson, 2021; Becker et al., 2021

51 Atkinson, 2021

52 Atkinson, 2013

53 Smith and Reid, 2018; White, 2017

54 Atkinson, 2013

55 Proctor, 2017

56 Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Rogers, 1961

57 Rogers, 1961; 1963

58 Schmid, 2018, p. 75

Growing Communities

I now turn to consider how being well unfolds through encounters with (un)bounded nature(s) in more-than-human third places. The role of other-than- and more-than-human nature in people's health is well established⁵⁹ and is becoming increasingly recognised within public health initiatives and through the prescribing of nature-based activities⁶⁰. Across Europe, social prescribing is a growing movement to connect people with community support in support of their health, which includes the prescribing of gardening⁶¹. Social prescribing could be considered to be part of neoliberalism, which shifts social responsibility from the state to the community. Yet, perhaps more importantly, community gardens are also places of collective social action which simultaneously challenge the tenets of neoliberalism⁶². Community gardens can facilitate people's co-becoming and sense of belonging through the co-creation of rewilded lines of flight. These lines of flight can trouble the estrangement caused from surveilled and privatised spaces through the formation of community, reconnection with other-than- and more-than-human nature, improvements in wellbeing, identity development, and practices of activism⁶³.

Community gardens are joint-endeavours where a group of people come together to tend to plants, their selves and others⁶⁴. The popularity of and demand for community gardens is increasing throughout Western Societies⁶⁵. There are often multiple focuses, including growing food, supporting health and wellbeing, improving the environment (aesthetically and 'sustainably'), and taking social action. Through a focus on health and wellbeing community gardens can be considered as a nature-based intervention, which aim to improve participants' wellbeing by incorporating nature⁶⁶ through regular, structured, and facilitated activities⁶⁷. Three affective characteristics have been identified as characterising nature-based interventions: nature, which is the setting or basis of activities; meaningful activities that develop skills, improve health and develop helpful practices; and social interaction, which support development of social skills and a sense of belonging. These affective characteristics are brought together firstly, through the facilitator's facilitation of the space and the participants involvement; and secondly, by the participants' motivation and agency to become involved and develop their way of being⁶⁸.

Community gardens are third places, which offer participants⁶⁹ an informal, caring and accepting environment. The acceptance in particular acts as an anchor, which facilitates participants' autonomy and self-expression, supports participants to try new things and open up to new experiences, and share their lived experience through the offering of peer support⁷⁰. Through the co-creation of shared experiences, participants develop an affective attachment to the community garden, which sustains the community. For example, the cultivation of food involves several steps, some of the participants may have planted the seeds, whilst others may then plant out the seedlings, and together they all enjoy the vegetables when they are harvested. During this process some of the participants may not see each other regularly, but remain connected through their engagements with the plants. It is by being part of this more-than-human assemblage

59 Brymer et al., 2019

60 Harrod and von Benzon, 2024

61 National Academy for Social Prescribing 2026; Social Prescribing EU, 2026

62 Nettle, 2020

63 Harrod, 2024; Nettle, 2020

64 Nettle, 2020

65 Bieri et al., 2024

66 Within the literature and in practice, nature is considered to be the other-than- and more-than-human nature and the setting or basis of activities.

67 Bragg and Atkins, 2016

68 Harrod, 2024

69 Participants may be referred to a community garden for a particular health reason or self-refer because of a health concern, an interest in gardening or a desire to meet and connect with other people.

70 Bishop & Purcell, 2013; Harris, 2017; Harrod, 2024; Sachs et al., 2022

that the participants recognise they are part of something bigger than themselves and therefore co-create a sense of belonging.

Participants' encounters *with* community gardens can be transformational, with participants developing long-term shifts to their sense of self through the development of wellbeing practices which include more-than-human communities (e.g., mindful encounters with other-than- and more-than-human nature, litter picking, environmental conservation), and moving into meaningful and purposeful occupations, which focus on communities and the environment⁷¹. These transformations do not only highlight the tonic of belonging, but also challenge the hyperindividualism produced by neoliberalism through activism. This activism begins at the community garden through an accepting, inclusive, and alternative community, which facilitates people's learning, sharing and growth, and values and works in harmony *with* other-than- and more-than-human-nature⁷². Activism is an expression of being rewilded. Through the co-creation of lines of flights this everyday social action and justice moves beyond the garden edges via participants planting seeds *with* the wider community through their new practices and occupations. This not only maintains and enhances the participant's rewilding, but facilitates the rewilding of communities through the promotion of values of interconnection, warmth, spontaneity and care.

Radical Relationships

I have proposed a core issue for the *animal* who lives *with* the city is the affects of loneliness, due to becoming estranged from one another and the city itself. Community gardens offer amelioration and transformation from this trouble through offering warmth, time and space in which to be. This occurs due to the formation of a safe psychosocial space, which is underpinned by relational dynamics. Within psychotherapy a therapeutic relationship which is authentic, empathic and non-judgemental is deemed a common factor in enabling successful therapy and considered necessary for therapeutic change⁷³. Meanwhile, Arthur Bohart and Karen Tallman⁷⁴ propose that the client is the most important factor in therapeutic change, as it is the client's perception and experience of the above relational qualities, as well as their interpretations of the therapeutic encounter, which influences their process of becoming. As such, the relational dynamics present influence how a person understands themselves, their choices, and way of being. When a person's perception of themselves and the world is met with support, then this facilitates a person to trust their own thoughts and feelings as a guide to their actions, maintaining and enhancing their process of becoming⁷⁵. As such, a person rewilds their inner world and reconnects to the internal locus of evaluation. Meanwhile, if a person's experiences are rejected by others, then a person denies and distorts their own judgement and instead seeks validation from others as a guide to living well, which leads to psychological distress. Psychological distress decreases when a person experiences safe spaces, where they are accepted for who they are⁷⁶.

At community gardens, facilitators offer affective spaces through being authentic, empathic and non-judgemental, which participants experience as safe, inclusive and accepting⁷⁷. These relational dynamics at community gardens help participants with their process of becoming not only through being accepted and developing greater trust in their self, but also due to the time and space offered to participants to be and not produce⁷⁸. Neoliberal capitalism, through the constant acceleration of economic activities and reduction in distances within and between our cities, compresses time and space⁷⁹. This causes places to lose their distinctiveness, ruptures communities, and speeds up our experience of daily life through increased production and consumption. This impacts our sense of self, as self-worth becomes tied to productivity, status and hy-

71 Harrod, 2024

72 Harrod, 2024; Nettle, 2020

73 Duncan et al., 2010

74 Bohart and Tallman, 2010

75 Rogers, 1961

76 Mearns and Cooper, 2018

77 Harrod et al., 2024

78 Harrod, 2024; 2025

79 Harvey, 1990

perindividualism, which severs our sense of belonging⁸⁰. Consequently, encountering a ‘slowing down’ of time provides participants with an affective space to rewild themselves by exploring their self, their interactions, their expressions, and location of their judgements⁸¹.

The practice of community gardening includes a gentle confronting of participants’ interdependency and interconnectedness with one another, as well as other-than- and more-than-human nature⁸². The latter is often framed by facilitators as a connection with nature (other-than- and more-than-human) and offered as providing participants a reciprocal relationship, from which participants can develop a sense of belonging and support for their wellbeing and other-than- and more-than-human nature is nurtured in return⁸³. Whilst many participants have discussed the benefits of embracing other-than- and more-than-human nature as part of their way of being, this confrontation may also prove to be uncomfortable for some participants as it brings into participants’ awareness that humans are a part of nature and dependent on nature to be well. The affective spaces community gardens co-create provide the opportunity for safe and patient encounters with the trouble, and for a supported reconnection *with* and rewilding of ourselves as interconnected and interdependent beings.

Towards Rewilding

The sun always makes it better-the bright light-the richness of the green grass-the blue sky and fluffy clouds-suddenly the stone of the buildings don't look so dark-the oppressive grey weight of short days is removed-the neon city at night is lost too-but spaces to sit, stare, and wonder open up-people no longer just circle the meadows, instead the meadows have turned into a joyous cacophony.

When I asked myself ‘where are they?’ I stood alone on a busy pavement, separate and full of desire to be accepted. An acceptance I craved in order to maintain my sense of being well. I was caught up with ‘self-making’ rather than making *with*⁸⁴. By risking rewilding myself through turning my attention away from my self towards the more-than-human I started to co-become and co-create a sense of belonging *with* Edinburgh. My loneliness was no longer so all encompassing, instead I spied tendrils reaching out, forming connections, and entangling me in more-than-human assemblages. These entanglements shifted my perceptions and experiences *with* Edinburgh, opening up further possibilities for meaningful social and emotional relationships. My process looks very similar to the encounters which unfold *with* community gardens, as it required me to gently confront my loneliness with empathy, acceptance and to be genuine in my encounters, as well as give myself time and space to roam *with* spontaneity *with* Edinburgh.

I proposed that the trouble is the affect of a shadow. A shadow of loneliness which is cast upon cities through neoliberalism producing hyperindividualism and eroding the provision of free, accessible and available third places. A third place that is increasing in popularity is the community garden, which offers participants not only an affective sanctuary from the fast-paced demands and isolation of everyday life, but also transformative experiences. The lines of flight co-created through encounters *with* community gardens facilitates improvements in participants’ wellbeing, belonging, and interconnectivity. This occurs through the relational dynamics present in community gardens, which support people to reconnect to their inner guides for living a good life. A good life, which supports autonomy and belonging as a (re)wild(ed) interconnected being.

Rewilding not only asks each of us to reintegrate other-than- and more-than-human nature into our complex assemblages, but also to reject the oppressive violence of neoliberalism on our ways of being and belonging. Rewilding supports social actions and justice, which can move us towards collective processes, which (en)counters loneliness; supports the fair, equitable and inclusive distribution of society’s surplus, and co-creates more-than-human belonging, which supports individual, community and ecolog-

80 Bettache, 2026

81 Harrod, 2024; 2025

82 Harrod, 2024

83 Richardson, 2023

84 Haraway, 2016

ical wellbeing. Consequently, community gardens' affective environments highlight where our attention needs to be drawn to in order to respond to the trouble. For, it is not just the *animal* who lives *with* the city that requires rewilding, but the city environment itself that needs rewilding, through shifting away from surveilled and exclusive spaces to open, warm and expressive places.

It's not just warmth and light that is opening up Edinburgh—more so I have opened up—I'm meeting Edinburgh with a curiosity not shaded by fear, but met with spontaneity—I'm excited to share my Edinburgh hand in hand—can it become a home?—that may depend on my continuing search for city cats.

"It's a dream that is carried in the heart: a fertile garden, time and space enough for all of us."

(Olivia Laing⁸⁵)

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Let the City Fall Apart

Urban Decline Beyond Preservation and Revitalization

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Abstract – This essay reconsiders urban deterioration not simply as failure, loss, or civic abandonment, but as a critical category through which the moral authority of preservation, repair, and revitalization can be questioned. While urban decline is often inseparable from racialized disinvestment, structural neglect, and unevenly distributed harm, the essay argues that not all forms of preservation deserve affirmation, and not all forms of falling apart are destructive. Against an anti-deterioration ethos that equates civic value with permanence, growth, and maintenance, this essay examines how declining urban spaces may interrupt harmful built inheritances, open cities to nonhuman lifeways, and disclose alternative forms of inhabitation. Abandoned lots, deteriorating infrastructures, and weathered surfaces are read not only as signs of vacancy or disorder, but as sites where ecological processes, informal uses, and other modes of urban life emerge. The essay does not romanticize abandonment or deny the violences of disrepair; rather, it calls for a more discriminating civic ethic capable of distinguishing imposed neglect from necessary unbuilding, harmful collapse from generative decomposition. Urban decline, in this account, becomes a way to ask when repair is care, when persistence is violence, and when allowing certain forms to decompose may be necessary for more just and ecological urban futures.

This essay is an affirmation of deterioration.

A city in decline, however, is rarely encountered positively or even neutrally. It arrives already interpreted as failure, abandonment, neglect, disorder, collapse. Empty buildings, shuttered storefronts, weedy lots, flaking façades, and cracked pavement signify that something has gone horribly wrong. A declining city is one in which the infrastructural body has lost its animating force as a once-living place falls beneath the threshold of value. To call a city declining is therefore never merely descriptive, but instead positions urban deterioration within an inherited moral architecture where endurance appears as a civic good, preservation as a civic duty, and repair as the obvious form of care.

Such an orientation is not without justification. Urban deterioration is often inseparable from racialized disinvestment, value abandonment, speculative extraction, and state-sanctioned neglect. And the dilapidation lands unevenly; its effects are suffered differentially, often by those already marginalized. To live amid crumbling infrastructures and broken-down systems is often not a philosophical provocation but an imposed condition of structural violence.

If decline so often appears as a civic evil, it is in part because the city remains a site through which modernity has sacralized its faith in permanence. Cities are imagined, built, and governed through an anti-deterioration ethos in which their virtues are cast



in the language of stability, resilience, sustainability, growth, and revitalization. Even when they change, that change is expected to take the form of managed extension rather than contraction or decline. The city is to endure. Its structures are to be maintained. Its functions are to be sustained. Where deterioration appears, the reflex is to arrest it.

What, though, is being preserved when urban form is conserved? Memory, sometimes. Public life, often. But also property relations, development logics, toxic inheritances, and attachments to built arrangements whose endurance may no longer be either ecologically desirable or politically defensible. The moral prestige of preservation depends on a prior agreement according to which what exists ought, insofar as possible, to continue. Yet, there is much whose violence lies precisely in their success at staying.

The lesson is visible most starkly in materials such as plastic, forever chemicals, and other residues whose durability was once celebrated as progress. Accumulating, lingering, and saturating, such substances reveal that the absence of decomposition may itself be disastrous.

Urban space is not reducible to something like plastic waste, but neither is its organization wholly outside logics of malignant continuation. There are urban forms that remain beyond their civic life, and not benignly. Vacant towers endure as repositories of speculative capital; evidence of a city ordered around investment rather than inhabitation. Heat-retaining surfaces continue to intensify urban climates. Infrastructures built for extraction are continually repaired into relevance. These examples make evident that urban harm is not exhausted by decline as loss. Harm is also produced through what remains because the city has been taught to equate continuation with value.

To say this is not to romanticize abandonment, nor to confuse devastation with possibility. It is, rather, to question the valuation through which the city is habitually read. Why is endurance presumed to be a civic virtue? Why is repair so often taken as the privileged expression of care? Why does the preservation of extant form carry such moral weight? If deterioration is always read through the singular register of civic loss, then decline as interruption, as deviation, as the condition through which another arrangement of urban life might come into view remains unthought.

Decline, though, is not entirely reducible to destruction. Etymologically, it signals a bending down, a turning aside, a movement away from a presumed straight path. It marks a divergence, not necessarily a fall from good to bad. Recovering these etymological roots unsettles the moral certainty with which decline is commonly received, reminding us that not every deterioration is a devastation; some make possible world rearrangement. Some forms of falling apart alter, redistribute, and recompose. Urban decline, rethought in this register, if only provisionally, suspends the moral inheritances that equate continuation with flourishing and decomposition with harm.

Such a suspension matters particularly for the city because the built environment has long served as an emblem of human resistance to decay. Construction appears as the triumph of form over disintegration. Maintenance appears as the labor by which that triumph is prolonged. Preservation appears as the ethical practice of holding deterioration at bay.

Buildings, roads, walls, tunnels, and utilities have been designed and built specifically against the dissolutionary activities of the more-than-human world. But the city is not, and never has been, outside deterioration. It is not a fixed artifact only later exposed to the degradations of time. It is from the start a process of alteration. Moisture enters walls. Metals oxidize. Paint peels. Surfaces crack, buckle, and soften. Heat, flood, and wind redraw the boundaries of a structure. Even the most rigidly engineered built form is continually negotiated by forces it cannot fully subordinate, as roots push through concrete while moss, fungi, insects, and birds inhabit the seams.

These spaces, where deterioration-creation and vitality-desertion are co-constitutive, render the concept of abandonment newly strange. Places of urban decline, places deemed “abandoned,” are rarely empty. They are relinquished by human systems of value while remaining dense with other forms of life: unsanctioned human use, vegetal overgrowth, animal habitation. What appears as vacancy from the standpoint of economic productivity is also an ongoing proliferation of life.

Abandonment, then, need not be read only as emptiness. It may also mark a threshold at which one regime of inhabitation ceases to fully govern a space, allowing other forms to emerge. This is not to say that every abandoned building or lot should be celebrated. But it is to note that urban thought loses something when it sees in “abandonment” only

a deficit to be remedied. What if some spaces become newly legible once no longer fully subordinated to intended use? What if the cessation of one form of order allows another set of relations to take shape? What if a city's broken-down spaces are not simply problems awaiting correction, but sites where the value of "correction" itself can be questioned? In these spaces we might recognize forms of de-pavement, making cities more water permeable, or the softening of concrete and asphalt heat islands into temperature-regulating greenery.

However, the most familiar response to abandonment, urban decline, and the depopulation of the city is often one of revitalization. While biological organisms cannot be revived, what can be revitalized, instead, are formations that were never fully recognized as "alive": economies, city centers, communities, infrastructures. "Life" is restored through human repopulation and reinvestment by redeveloping and reoccupying, to reinsert spaces into circuits of value.

The return of industry, people, or cultural infrastructure often coincides with the suppression or erasure of ecologies that emerged in the wake of a particular mode of human withdrawal. Humans' informal uses of space, nonhuman occupations, and deteriorated but adaptive environments are reframed as waste, as evidence of abandonment, and as signs of devitalization in which the most ethical action is understood as eradication. Rather than a neutral return, revitalization is a reallocation of liveliness, one that transforms certain presences into waste in order to render others viable. To revitalize is then to decide which forms of life are legible as life at all.

And yet, challenging this anti-deterioration ethos through a troubling of revitalization is not to defend neglect. Neglect remains one of the principal ways that harm is unevenly distributed across urban space. Broken housing, failing transit, contaminated water, and crumbling public institutions are not the kinds of decline one can affirm without reproducing the violences they embody. A revaluation of deterioration must remain situated, attentive to who bears urban decline, how, and under what conditions. It may undo domination in one site and deepen abandonment in another. The difference is irreducibly political.

But it is exactly because this difference matters that the preservation reflex should not be allowed to govern our thinking in advance. Not all forms of urban deterioration are the same, and not all forms of urban endurance deserve affirmation. Some declines dispossess. Other forms of falling apart interrupt the sanctity of built permanence and open urban space to alternate uses, alternate tempos, and alternate agents of world-making.

In this, the built environment is especially important because it unsettles the assumption that creation is singularly additive. Creation is attributed to design, planning, engineering, and policy; decline is assigned to accident, failure, neglect, or natural invasion. Yet once the preservation/destruction binary loosens, another picture emerges. Deterioration also creates. Erosion sculpts. Weathering recolors. Collapse redistributes. Rust, rot, and root do not subtract from built form and participate in its transformation, revealing that worlds are made not only through erection and assembly but also through decomposition and detraction.

While difficult to recognize within urban discourse when the city remains conceptually overowned by the human, nonhuman forces are not external saboteurs of urban form. They are among its ongoing architects. They weather, infiltrate, compost, and recompose the city from within. In doing so, they disclose a built environment that is never wholly built, but an unstable and permeable arrangement of materials in time.

And yet, to note as much does not deliver a ready-made program. Rather, such an orientation asks us to become more discriminating about what should endure, what should be repaired, what should be permitted to decompose, and what forms of life might depend upon such decomposition. It asks us to distinguish between imposed neglect and necessary unbuilding, between disrepair as violence and deterioration as critique of enduring harmful forms. Above all, it unsettles the inheritance that positions preservation as sacrosanct and decline as its degraded other.

If the contemporary city is both deteriorating and ought to be thought ecologically, it cannot remain bound to a fantasy of endless maintenance. It must instead learn to inhabit the tension between repair and refusal, recognizing that there are times when care demands maintenance and that there are also times when care requires allowing form to fall apart. Acknowledging as much is not an abandonment of the city, but it is a refusal to confuse its flourishing with the indefinite persistence of the built.



Urban decline, then, should not be understood only as the sign that a city has failed. Sometimes it is exactly through decline that a city becomes capable of becoming otherwise. Rather than a denial of violences, to revalue deterioration in this way refuses the monopolization of meaning most often imposed on the deteriorating and depopulating city. It is to ask, with greater precision than the preservation reflex allows, when endurance shelters worlds and when it suffocates them, when repair is care and when it is only the resurrection of what ought finally to end.

This is perhaps the harder civic ethic. It offers no easy consolation, no universal defense of decay and no simple call to save. But cities are already teeming with differing forms of decline and different demands for endurance. The task is not to choose between preservation and deterioration. It is to learn how to judge among them, how to attune ourselves to the harms of persistence as well as the harms of collapse, and how to recognize that some urban futures may depend less on revitalizing what remains than on allowing certain inheritances to decompose.



Palimpsest city

Memory and everyday life weave realities

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Abstract – Reclaiming the multiplicity of what a city means, this article works with the palimpsest archetype through the lens of complex thinking to explore how memory shapes reality, rather than merely recalling it. The methodology, based on a literature review, first lays the foundations for how the palimpsest archetype develops in the city, both literally and metaphorically; then examines its relation to the basic concepts of Edgar Morin’s Theory of Complexity; followed by distinctions between memory and history, leaning into its economic and political implications. This allows for a deeper dive into different types of memory: individual, collective, historical, short-term, long-term, organic, voluntary, and involuntary. The last section of the article discusses Lethos and Aletheia vs. Platonism, how they relate to creating reality vs. discovering reality, and the role of daily life in the process of remembering and forgetting, which shapes our tangible and intangible realities. In the final considerations, memory is delineated as an individual and collective means of resistance against commodification processes.

Introduction

The city is largely studied by its functionality, how well greased and coordinated each and every part of this large machine is – parts that have been differentiated, redistributed, inverted, displaced, and accumulated accordingly, as well as rejected as waste products whenever deemed abnormal, deviant, or ill¹. From this perspective, capitalist cityscapes are often interpreted in reference to the modernist quote of Sullivan’s “form follows function”², and this machine is the materialization of the hegemonic systems and structures in power. As a matter of fact, that is another interpretation falling parallel to Sullivan’s: form follows power, and a talk about the “relationship between architecture and power must acknowledge at least two aspects: first, architects’ dependency on the economically powerful for their commissions and, second, the mobilization of architecture as a resource by those in power”^{3, 4}. As a resource of those in power, it was designed to keep the social order under panoptic administrations and networks of surveillance⁵, designed to deliver a neglected urban experience:

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- 1 Certeau 1984
 - 2 Sullivan 1896
 - 3 Jones 2009, p.2521
 - 4 Gassner 2017, p.757
 - 5 Certeau 1984

“To be sure, progress allows an increasing number of these waste products to be reintroduced into administrative circuits and transforms even deficiencies (in health, security, etc.) into ways of making the networks of order denser. But in reality, it repeatedly produces effects contrary to those at which it aims: the profit system generates a loss which, in the multiple forms of wretchedness and poverty outside the system and of waste inside it, constantly turns production into “expenditure.”(...) the functionalist organization, by privileging progress (i.e., time), causes the condition of its own possibility— space itself—to be forgotten”⁶

But as expected, profit is not solely pursued by optimizing the functionality of the city-machine. The ability to commodify virtually everything, even the things that once apparently stood in its path as some form of resistance, speaks to the high level of adaptability of the system. The image of a city is certainly not exempt from undergoing commodification, so much so that there are streetscapes and skylines around the world carefully curated to achieve *postcard views* that generate tourism-related profit and appeal⁷.

Going further into certain elements of a city’s skyline, such as the case of office towers in global cities, Grubbauer⁸ says that the logic is: more towers need to be built so more towers can be built. It does not matter if the ones that were already built are barely occupied, sparsely rented, or not functioning at all. While we are used to the notion of economic context and economic agents shaping urban form, Gassner⁹ notes that “urban form also has economic agency: finance follows form. Towers are not merely built to respond to an existing or predicted demand for office space but also in order to create further demand.”¹⁰ Speculation in these cases works on the imperative of how active the construction sector is at the moment and the promise that the building being occupied and generating revenue over the course of its cycle is just a matter of time. The intention of speculative processes is to stir the imagination and desires until they look so appealing that the promise, and sometimes the promise alone, is bought: the burden of proof lies in a foggy but always bright future. Commodified skylines of global cities are then objects of appetites, of illusions, but especially of deceitfulness, in the service of transnational elites¹¹. Speculation around skylines and office towers operates on a projected image of success, directly connected to the materialization of symbols of wealth on a spatial level:

“a particular economic imaginary gains plausibility when it is discursively and visually anchored in urban space. In Vienna, for example, office towers are used to both demonstrate the city’s already existing success as an international business location as well as to further attract international actors”¹²

The urban spaces of contemporary cities more often than not expose how much their exchange value as commodities surpasses their actual meaning, because “The only meaning of the commodity is its price; it has, as a commodity, no other meaning”¹³. But it was not always like this, with cities as enterprises, corporations to be administered to maximize profits and results, with the tactics of speculative markets dictating housing dynamics, infrastructure, and green and blue spaces.

Cities were once a collective artifact of human survival, and about this collectivity, Cullen¹⁴ says it was more than just the sum of its inhabitants, because by choosing to live together instead of in isolation (which is the first response in a hostile environment, before you can establish trustworthy relationships), they generated a scale and quality of communal well-being that would not have been possible otherwise.

Living in a community, however, did not immediately mean living in cities. Initially, life in society was structured in nomadic or semi-nomadic tribal groups in search of a stable source of food, safety from the natural elements, and safety from violence with-

6 Certeau 1984, pp.94-95
7 Kaika and Thiellen 2006
8 Grubbauer 2014
9 Gassner 2017
10 Gassner 2017, p.757
11 Kaika 2011
12 Grubbauer 2014, p.346
13 Gassner 2017, p.765
14 Cullen 1983

in their own group or other groups. The decision to settle permanently in a location changed the whole course of humankind, having as its first evidence the triggering of the Demographic Transition of the Neolithic¹⁵. Also called the Agricultural Revolution, or simply the Neolithic Revolution, the lifestyle change from a nomadic one based on hunting and extractivism to a sedentary one based on agriculture and livestock caused a population boom and the beginning of an intricate and complex net of relations between resources, inhabitants, and ecosystemic dynamics, ranging from the modification of the geophysical substrate composition, hydrographic characteristics, and even the selection and concentration of compounds and pathogenic species¹⁶. This large net of interconnections and mutual influence between human beings and inhabited spaces is so intense that it might, indeed, have become indissociable. In the words of Rossi, the city is “inseparable from the formation of civilization and it is a permanent fact, universal and necessary.”¹⁷

As city-making evolved, Kostoff¹⁸ explains that a huge part of the process started to be anchored in the development and sophistication of bureaucracy to handle transactions, laws, and regulations that became necessary under the widely accepted theory of surplus for city origins: land and property ownership (either public or private); compulsory purchase of land and property due to the rise of the power of governments; building codes and regulations; development of the first master plans; issuing of property taxes; and administrative structures—but also, more complex infrastructures like irrigation systems and bridges. Economy, bureaucracy, politics, technological advancement, and the physical aspects, they all became inseparable and progressively more complicated as cities themselves evolved. But a simple, organic surplus of the community could not possibly be the only origin of cities. As a matter of fact:

“Sometimes cities are laid out by fiat, as perfect shapes and for premeditated ends. They may aim to reflect a cosmic rule or an ideal society, be cast as a machine of war, or have no higher purpose than to generate profit for the founder. (...) Or this act may be nothing more than a routinized and repetitive event.”¹⁹.

Cities founded as repetitive events can be found in the path of war of an empire as a way to establish control over the land; colonization of South and Central America, Africa, and Oceania by European countries after massive genocide and enslavement of First Nations also established control so they could exploit the land; railroad cities, after the Industrial Revolution, became quite common, and so on. The repetitive character usually meant the superimposition of an imprint with a set of morphological elements or a set of morphological processes.

Be it as a collective artifact of human survival, a consequence of produce and trading surplus, a reflection of the divine on earth, the genesis of an idealized society, a war apparatus, an aftermath of genocide and exploitation, or a piece of infrastructure for new and pervasive transportation technology—Kostof²⁰ elaborates on nine characteristics that answer the difficult question of what a city is. First, it must have an energized crowding, related not to the size but to the density of the city, taking into consideration the geographical and historical context; second, a connection to other cities, because they do not exist in isolation, people travel, trade, etc.; third, an imaginary or physical boundary within which restrictions or privileges may apply; fourth, differentiation or specialization of work; fifth, urban resources, such as surplus, trade, commodities, natural features, and human resources; sixth, written records related to the growing bureaucracy of property, administration, census, etc.; seventh, every city has its countryside; eighth, a monumental framework that could be public buildings, monuments, landmarks, or even the fabric of the city itself; and lastly, buildings and people, not just one or the other—a city without people is a dead place, a ghost town.

15 Leew 2017

16 Leew 2017

17 Original quote in Portuguese: “inseparável da formação da civilização e é um fato permanente, universal e necessário.” (Rossi 1995, p.01)

18 Kostoff 1991

19 Kostof 1991, p.16

20 Kostof 1991

Beyond that, to Lynch²¹ and Cullen²², the city is a piece of art. This definition is especially intriguing because it necessarily assumes the plurality not only of the *artists* but also of the *spectators*, the existence of conscious and unconscious motivations, implicitly embraces emotion, irrationality, experience, imperfection, and perception. But, unlike painting or sculpture, the city is a collective artifact of large scale, made in such a way that the roles of artists and spectators often intersect in the same individual, in a recursive manner of cause and consequence²³. Furthermore, the city is a temporal art. Music and dance are temporal arts as well, but they are, in great part, collections of closed intervals, built with more control and intentions that consider this finite disposition for production or stimulation of their aesthetic appreciations. The city, however, almost always runs at open intervals, without a known end or beginning, or semi-open, with just a known beginning or end but not both. If we talk about cities with closed intervals of time, the approach is likely predominantly archaeological because they are cities that rose and fell, civilizations that were swept from the face of the Earth. In these open and semi-open intervals, “the sequences are inverted, interrupted, abandoned, annulled²⁴”.

Without exhausting the multiplicity of conceptions about the city, the paths that seem to diverge and visions, at times conflicting or incompatible, coexist—one does not necessarily invalidate the other. Together, they bring out the complex reality of the urban environment: *unitas multiplex*, the association between unity and multiplicity, the very nature of what is woven together²⁵. All these paths that seem to diverge, each one in its own way, tell us that the city is more than its materiality, its tangible half, its apparent concrete reality.

Materials and methods

This article utilizes the palimpsest archetype through the lens of complex thinking to explore how memory shapes reality instead of recalling it. With methodology based on a literature review, we start with the foundations of the palimpsest archetype, moving on to the basic concepts of Edgar Morin’s Theory of Complexity, followed by distinctions between memory and history, emphasizing the economic and political implications. This allows for a deeper dive into different types of memory: individual, collective, historical, short-term, long-term, organic, voluntary, and involuntary. The last section discusses Lethos and Aletheia vs. Platonism, as well as the role of daily life in the process of remembering and forgetting. In the final considerations, memory is ultimately delineated as an individual and collective means of resistance against the commodification processes and structures of the city as a machine, which, by design, delivers neglected urban spaces and urban experiences.

Results

PALIMPSEST CITY

In the category *The cities and memory* in the classic work of Ítalo Calvino²⁶, “Invisible Cities”, one in particular incites the imagination: Zaira. Our explorer Marco Polo begins the account of Zaira to Kublai Khan, saying that no description containing merely the physical characteristics of it would be able to convey anything truly relevant. Zaira is not about walls and pavements, Zaira is made out of the relations between built elements and the events that took place in these elements.

In the city, memories and histories overlay one another without erasing the ones that were there before them—similar to the process of the production of a palimpsest. A pa-

21 Lynch 1960

22 Cullen 1983

23 Morin 2015

24 Original quote in Portuguese: “as sequências são invertidas, interrompidas, abandonadas, anuladas” (Lynch, 1960, p.11).

25 Morin 2015

26 Calvino 1990

limpsest is an already written scroll that is reutilized for new content, but the layering is imperfect because the ink of the previous text can never be fully removed, and the scroll can never be a blank canvas again. The palimpsest approach²⁷ invokes the superimposition of cultural layers as part of an ever-changing social fabric, and it has been utilized in several disciplines also as a metaphor through which one reads the *re-inscription* of multiple layers of the built environment²⁸. Chen²⁹ expands on the importance of the palimpsest archetype, highlighting that not only spaces but also memory and the human brain itself are palimpsests.

Under the effect of Morin's³⁰ dialogic operator, in the palimpsest city, shapes, flows, histories, intentions, chances, habits, and ruptures that seemed to be apart are reunited and brought together for interpretation and experience. These noises from the past interact in curious ways with the layers of meanings—between chaos and order, yesterday and today blur their boundaries into one another and feed the imagination of countless cities that could have been or still those that can come to be:

“Architecture frees us from the embrace of the present (...) buildings and cities are instruments and museums of time. They allow us to see and understand the passing of history and participate in temporal cycles that transcend our individual lives³¹”

The palimpsest city is hologramatic, as Zaira, because a “description of Zaira as currently is should contain the entire past of Zaira”, in other words, one cannot dissociate the part from the entirety – the part is in the whole, and the whole is in the part. The hologramatic city rejects the hyperspecialization and fragmentation of traditional science, based on the paradigm of simplification; it surpasses the reductionism that only sees the parts and the holism that only sees the indistinct mixture of the whole³².

To the process of accumulation of layers and layers of history, memory, and spatial narratives of the palimpsest city, Tucci³³ gives the names of *sedimentation*, an analogy to the long geological process of sedimentary rock formation in nature. A very interesting aspect of sedimentary rocks is that, despite the long formation process, each layer has the potential to preserve the characteristics and/or clues from the period in which they were deposited, with the fidelity of the clue's preservation, as it were, inversely proportional to the intensity of possible metamorphic processes³⁴. In other words, there is a possibility of something remaining and reaching our present moment practically untouched, as if it were frozen in time; and for us to experience this part and connect to the whole density, the essence, the heart of it. This hologramatic character will be revisited in the next sections, especially in the *involuntary memory* part, according to Proust.

Despite the whole being in the part and vice versa, to Tucci, these layers may not be visible in every part; there are places, however, that are like transversal cuts in geological structures, leaving all the layers exposed: these are the tectonic windows. Through the tectonic windows, we can read, interpret, extract, and relate meanings from past and current layers. Another widely used term that may share correspondences with the concept of *tectonic windows* is *places of memory*, since they enable, like tectonic windows, the association, reading, and interpretation of different temporal layers. However, inherent in the concept of places of memory is the prerogative of places *with* and *without* memory, or, at least, places denser or shallower in memory than others. While in the concept of tectonic windows, we are talking about the visibility and invisibility of layers without determining a priori their existence or nonexistence.

27 Lather 2001

28 Sigler 2014

29 Chen et al 2024

30 Morin 2015

31 Original quote in Portuguese: “A arquitetura nos emancipa do abraço do presente (...) as edificações e as cidades são instrumentos e museus do tempo. Elas nos permitem ver e entender o passar da história e participar de ciclos temporais que ultrapassam nossas vidas individuais.” (Pallasmaa 2011, p. 49)

32 Morin 2015

33 Tucci 2011

34 A set of chemical and/or physical processes that change the composition of sedimentary rocks.

MEMORY AND HISTORY

Although they often appear together or are used interchangeably in certain situations due to the similarity of content, it is necessary to establish a distinction between history and memory and, subsequently, formalizations about individual memory, historical memory, collective memory, and narratives and how they interact in the construction of reality. The first distinction between history and memory is that while the concept of history in its essence is linked to the broad structure of production, maintenance, and revision of scientific knowledge and, therefore, a cultural and collective construct, memory in the first instance is an individual biological process in which the construction of personality, individual identity, learning processes, and immediate and long-term emotional and physical reactions to tangible and intangible environmental stimuli are anchored.

As a construct of traditional science, history seeks the abstraction of the subject, aiming for an impartiality that might be more idealized than executable to ensure the quality, at least nominal, of the facts; memory, on the other hand, makes no sense whatsoever without the subject's experience, thus, the intensity of the subject's relationship with it determines its relevance. In these terms, while history stems from a progressive movement of exclusion of the subject from the object of study, memory inserts the subject and works from the biases endowed with authenticity, recognizing the impracticality and impossibility of completely removing the subject from the object of study. The primary source of what is considered impartial facts has traditionally been historical documents, but they are not innocuous, independent of the medium. Historical documents are a montage resulting from the conscious or unconscious manipulation of the history of each period and the society that made it, but also the effort of historical societies to compel a specific image of themselves to the future; in the end, there is no such thing as document-truth—all documents are lies—and it is up to the historians to not let themselves be fooled or tangled in naiveté³⁵. Friedman³⁶ goes as far as to say that all modern historiography is mythology, given that history per se is the process of imprinting the present onto the past.

Pesavento³⁷ agrees with Le Goff when he says that history as a scientific discipline carries in a generalized and comprehensive way the *pretension of affirming what has been* and, consequently, the administration and/or construction of collective memory. Ježernik³⁸, however, emphasizes a lighter, yet necessary view of this scientific field, as the one responsible for helping shape human beings into inquisitive, curious creatures, capable of working through the flaws and gaps and finding direction and meaning. Note that Pesavento and Le Goff stress the authoritarian aspect of the discipline, while Ježernik focuses, perhaps, on the subject's ability to subvert structures, instead of accepting *it as it is*, and asks *what it is*.

Besides being subjective and biological, memory is a natural, spontaneous, disinterested, and selective activity since it retains only what is necessary from the past to connect with the present³⁹. Despite its similarities with Halbwachs regarding the characteristics of memory, such as spontaneity and vulnerability, Nora⁴⁰ fundamentally diverges from Halbwachs regarding the movement of time and the assumed chronological evolution. For Nora, memory is life itself, constantly updated within an eternal present, which would be the same as expressing the futility of concepts such as present and future. However, memory is *historicized*, that is, imprisoned by history and in temporal lock-step with it—the submission of memory to history has become so ubiquitous that the reason memory is so much talked about lately is precisely because it no longer exists.

Le Goff⁴¹ classified memory into three categories: individual, historical, and collective. Individual memory was discussed in the previous paragraphs and will be revisited in the next section. For now, let us focus on historical and collective memory. Both are periodicized into five chronological phases of evolution: ethnic, oral, medieval, writ-

35 Le Goff 1990

36 Friedman 1992

37 Pesavento 2004

38 Ježernik 1998

39 Halbwachs 1990

40 Nora 1993

41 Le Goff 1990

ten, and contemporary. Collective memory is periodicized by Le Goff according to the phases of historical memory: oral transmission, written transmission on tablets, transmission on simple cards, mechanized transmission, and electronic serialization.

At this point, albeit indirectly, Nora's controversial statement resonates with Le Goff's analysis of systematization. When Nora speaks of the extinction of memory, he is not referring to individual memory but rather to the death of historical and collective memory: memory that has undergone both a cumulative process of diminishing the individual's sphere of influence in relevant decisions and actions within their group and the increasingly less organic involvement of forms of collective memory transmission. The first happens because of the societal transition from small ethnic groups to a multipolarized global culture, which inevitably creates a gradual distance from individual memory to historical memory. The second happens because of the shift from oral transmission to today's electronic serialization, which does not rely on our neurophysiological capabilities (considered unreliable) and is virtually capable of producing and storing data that has technologically surpassed human capabilities for many decades. After this brief historical overview, Nora will likely seem less controversial and more like a messenger of news that is not all that fresh.

Aside from the judgment and values assigned to the current state of electronic serialization in which Le Goff places us, and which Nora may lament, it is important to reflect on how necessarily human the construction and reconstruction of historical and collective memories continues to be. Even though the sphere of influence within our groups seemingly diminishes every day, to some extent we are also beginning to understand that not only does the global influence the local, but also the local influences the global; even though the transmission of collective memories seems to grow increasingly inorganic and independent of us, all the structures and systems in which the production and transmission of memories of any category mentioned so far are anchored are still human creations. There might be more mediations between one end and the other, giving the impression that there are no longer individuals in the process, only interfaces, but what lies at the end of it all, after passing through all the filters, at each of these ends, are people, are still people.

INVOLUNTARY AND VOLUNTARY MEMORY

After analyzing the aspects and dynamics of collective and historical memories, Seixas⁴² considers the issue of voluntary and involuntary memories, which, although not explicitly classified by him as belonging to the scope of individual memory, are precisely where they function. Therefore, in this section, approximations will be made to the psychological and biological spheres of memory and how they are reflected on the subject's scale and social scale.

Voluntary memory is controlled, intentional, rational, and functional. Without short, medium, and long-term voluntary memory, any kind of learning, language, and communication system or the acquisition and transfer of manual, motor, or abstract skills, among many other things, would be impossible. From seemingly simple, routine daily tasks (working memory) to writing a note on the refrigerator (short-term memory, codification, and language) to walking or driving from home to work (spatial memory, motor memory) to catching an object thrown at us (motor memory, in this case also called reflex), everything we do, even in the most ordinary of days, is only possible through the construction and support of memory, and these memories involve complex and coordinated neuropsychophysiological mechanisms within our vast central and peripheral neural networks. Without voluntary memory, it would not be possible to associate two seemingly separate objects and give them meaning, whatever they may be. Assigning characteristics, detecting patterns under predefined classification criteria, comparing, adding, and excluding elements from certain groups—these are all primordial and essentially human thought processes. And through these processes⁴³, anchored in voluntary memories, we can create, but above all, we can retain what has been created and continue to create from a new point that is no longer a blank slate. Simmel⁴⁴ discusses this matter in "The Bridge and the Door" by saying that we project our wish for memory

42 Seixas 2001

43 Although it is not exclusive to our species.

44 Simmel 1996

within ourselves and outside ourselves: the memory of connection is materialized in paths and roads, reaching its literal and metaphorical peak in the bridge; similarly, the memory of separation is literally and metaphorically materialized in the door.

The understanding and pursuit of optimization of learning processes and consolidation of memory in all their variations have been the target of growing and justified interest in the scientific community, with great emphasis on the emerging discipline of Neuroeducation, which has strong foundations in the work of Edgar Morin⁴⁵.

Ricouer⁴⁶ highlights the common tendency to approach memory from a place of deficiency, even dysfunction, which certainly has adequate arguments in its favor, but there is an undeniable need to also address memory from a place of success. In daily life, memory is the only continuous, conscious, and unconscious *organic reference of our own existence*. And about the matter of fluidity of memory, interpreted as unreliability by some, Certeau⁴⁷ explains that it is memory at its best, alive, in action; when it stops being fluid, it becomes an echo already.

Proust⁴⁸, however, vehemently professed that true memory, genuine memory, was not voluntary but involuntary. Involuntary memories appear without the effort to remember, either because of an emotional trigger or a situation that favors the reminiscence. Their significance lies in their ability to escape deformation, fading, or erasure in a way that voluntary memories cannot when submitted to the passage of time⁴⁹. The triggers for involuntary memories differ from person to person, but one fact remains: they come unbidden, unannounced, unedited. Involuntary memory is irrational and devoid of pragmatic value; it cannot be intentionally exploited because it cannot be predicted, quantified, or controlled in any measure – and the system demands at least one of these three factors to even begin to commodify or speculate around something. For Seixas⁵⁰, involuntary memory is made of sudden flashes that recede with the slightest approach of voluntary memory. It is unstable and non-continuous, not concerned about filling in the gaps. Instead, the gaps and voids are accepted and incorporated into whatever is built-in, imperfect, and dense. In the gaps and voids of involuntary memory reside all possible alternatives; these voids are spaces for imagination and projection of our longings. More than any other type of memory, it embraces the hologramatic character that seduced Proust:

“Memory is therefore something that “transcends,” that “overcomes obstacles,” that “emerges,” that erupts: the feelings associated with this journey are ambiguous, but ever-present. There is no involuntary memory that is not charged with affection, and even if the entirety of the past is irretrievably lost, what returns is whole, complete, with its emotional tones and affective “charm.”⁵¹”

The hologramatic character of involuntary memory can be associated with the concept of tectonic windows previously presented, since both bring the possibility of experiencing the completeness of something, almost untouched, even if only a part of it is able to reach us.

45 Morin 2007a, 2007b, 2015

46 Ricouer 2020

47 Certeau 1984

48 Proust 2012

49 Pereira et al 2025

50 Seixas 2001

51 Original quote in Portuguese: “A memória é, portanto, algo que ‘atravessa’, que ‘vence obstáculos’, que ‘emerge’, que irrompe: os sentimentos associados a este percurso são ambíguos, mas estão sempre presentes. Não há memória involuntária que não venha carregada de afetividade e, ainda que a integralidade do passado esteja irremediavelmente perdida, aquilo que retorna vem inteiro, íntegro porque com suas tonalidades emocionais e ‘charme’ afetivo.” (SEIXAS 2001, p. 47)

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

In Plato's ⁵²classical philosophy, which still strongly resonates today in the axiomatic foundations of classical science, especially in the natural sciences⁵³, Plato states that our tangible world is an imperfect copy of an ideal world that exists in an alternate plane⁵⁴. Through the Myth of the Cave, it is understood that there is always the latent potential to find the *Absolute Truth* of anything, any mechanism, or any process that exists in our world of copies (also called shadows), because it already exists in the ideal world. Our senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, and speech – lie, because they apprehend and function within and for the materiality of our world of copies; our flawed sensory interpretations that stem from the organic limitations of our five senses construct the imperfect experiences and interactions with this material world. And it is based on this premise that the division and hierarchy of the arts into liberal and manual in ancient Greece were born, respectively: the more abstract, the closer to the ideal world; the more concrete, the further from the ideal world and rooted in the illusions of the senses and shadows.

This ideal world exists independently of us. All knowledge and truth are, therefore, a matter of “discovery,” not “invention” or creation. At this point, similarities and resonances with the famous story of the apple and how Newton discovered the Law of Gravity⁵⁵—or, in more appropriate terms, mathematically formulated a law of nature, and the concept of the earthly world and the heavenly paradise of Christian mythology and several other religions, are no mere coincidence. Both assume the existence of a priori universal truths, and our sole mission is to discover what they are and how to access them. But, before Platonism, reality was something else; reality was not a copy of anything pre-existing; reality only existed as long as it lived within each one of us, in a literal and organic form: memory.

In ancient Greek, the words *truth*, *to exist*, and *to remember* all correspond to *aletheia*, while *error*, *death*, and *to forget* correspond to *lethos*. Juxtaposed in this way, it is easy to deduce the process of lexical morphology that shows us that *aletheia* is the opposite of *lethos*:

ALETHEIA		
(prefix) A	+	LETH (radical)
no, negative		forget

Table 1: Lexical morphology of the word *aletheia*. Source: Author 1, 2026

In Greek mythology, there are five rivers in the underworld ruled by Hades, each traveled by different souls placed there for punishment or transition to a dignified afterlife. The River Lethe, also known as the River of Oblivion, rises in the cave of Hypnos, the god of Sleep, and flows to the border of the Elysian Fields. The soul worthy of the Elysian Fields must bathe in the waters of Lethe to erase its past life and enter paradise like a blank canvas. Understand that only after the total oblivion of its former life does a soul truly complete the cycle of death, the absolute end, so a new and eternal life can begin.

52 Plato's works “consist of twenty-eight *Dialogues* and thirteen others of variously uncertain authorship. There are also thirteen *Letters*, three of which (VI, VII and VIII) are generally recognized as having been written by Plato. Plato's *Dialogues* cover a wide range of subjects: duty, courage, virtue, justice, love, beauty, science, nature, rhetoric and the harmony of words with Being and with Ideas; the nature of humankind, wisdom, kingship, legislation, etc” (Hummel, 1994, 2). Published as *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (1961), edited by Edith Hamilton, Huntington Cairns, and translated by Lane Cooper. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Princeton.

53 Burgin 2017

54 Plato 1961

55 First published in his work *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) [Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy], commonly known as the *Principia*. Publisher: Jussu Societatis Regiæ ac Typis Joseph Streater, London. Available at the Cambridge University Library as the original first edition with annotations made by Newton, and also as a digital copy at: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/newton/2>

The other souls that sailed the other rivers bound for other lands still carry the memories, torments, desires, and longings of their earthly lives. In other words, they have not completely died, even though they can no longer return to our world. The rivers of Hades teach us that we only truly die when we absolutely forget who we are.

Remembering and forgetting are the two sides of the same coin that build realities in constant editing, conflict, and reconciliation. This reality must first live within us so it can come to existence outside of us. Individual realities and shared realities are woven together to form a collective one that comes to exist through us and for us, as explored in Simmel's "The Bridge and Door". This complex, constantly edited reality, connotatively and denotatively, assumes the duality of remembering and forgetting, assumes the nonlinearity between cause and effect, assumes the entirety of the portion of reality that lives organically and metaphorically within us—that is, this reality is dialogical, recursive, and hologramatic. Memory does not recall reality; it creates it.

In the palimpsest city, what is remembered and what is forgotten? What exists or ceases to exist? What layers of meaning are seized or erased? The first step in remembering is perceiving. Perceiving with the eyes, with the skin, with the ears, with the body, with the imagination—but in daily life, we become blind to the elements and layers we experience repeatedly, we nullify or weaken the meanings of what has inevitably been covered by the veil of opacity of routine. Even the most extraordinary of things can start to be perceived as ordinary, given enough cycles of repetition. But then, how is this veil of opacity cast by routine that invisibilizes the layers of meaning of the palimpsest city lifted? It may sound counterintuitive, but as the routine fades, the routine also lights up.

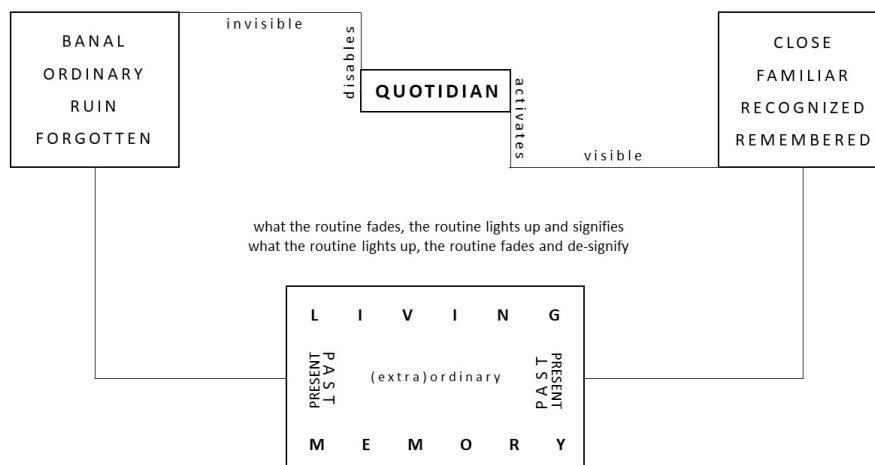


Diagram 1: *Quotidian, living, and memory.* Source: Author 1, 2025

The “Cities are amalgams of buildings and people. They are inhabited settings from which daily rituals – the mundane and the extraordinary, the random and the staged – derive their validity. In the urban artifact and its mutations are condensed continuities of time and place.”⁵⁶ What is banal and ordinary is also the other side of what is close, familiar, recognized, remembered. And it is between living and memory that the (extra) ordinary is constructed every day (Diagram 1).

Final considerations

In the city-machine, from local to global stages, the hegemonic structures in place prioritize functionality, control, surveillance (from the panoptic to AI), speculation, and commodification to the detriment of the quality of the urban experience and urban spaces. In this context, memory can be a legitimate and powerful counter-element or an axis in which restructuring, transformation, and reclaiming of territories, groups, dynamics, and sociospatial narratives. Narratives play a fundamental role in the con-

56 Kostof 1991, p.16

struction of realities, as they transit, mediate, and modulate the relationship between memory and history. A narrative interweaves a series of personal experiences to form collective memories, and the potential of a narrative lies in its ability to construct a collective identity that continues to find correspondences in individual identities. Narratives possess both the spontaneity and organicity of memory and the social responsibility of history. Certeau also views narratives as spatial trajectories that tie together the city, building the urban fabric in space and time.

Le Goff⁵⁷ brings from the field of psychology that remembering and forgetting are conscious or unconscious manipulations exercised by interest, affection, desire, inhibition, and censorship. These manipulations occur at the individual level but also collectively as a society, with profound political repercussions, consolidating power and control of whoever is in charge of the dominant narratives. Amnesia is not only a disturbance that affects the individual but also the voluntary or involuntary loss of collective memory in people and nations, resulting in disturbances in the collective identity.

Blokland⁵⁸ gives two views about the character of collective memory: first, as a shared memory between members of the same social groups, leaning more into the process of recollection of events with one another than the events themselves; second, it can be viewed as a collective mind, a container of stories of a determined group from which an individual does not necessarily have to have lived through to feel they also belong. This collective mind is a great factor in the cultural cohesion of the group that possesses it, being a powerful resource that can, among other factors, be used to legitimize claims over territories⁵⁹.

Therefore, the power of narratives, collective memory, and the repercussion of the interested manipulation of both⁶⁰ has been the hallmark of nineteenth-century nationalist movements that used historical heritage as a tool to invent collective identities and a common past⁶¹, but also of current governments and ruling classes. Sassen⁶² associates the interested manipulation of narratives and collective memory by governments as a response to the growing competitiveness between nations and regions in the global market, turning heritage and identity into commodities, much like a city's image, skyline, and high-rise office towers.

The ways in which memory shapes reality may sound abstract or even poetic to those who have been living in apparently stable structures, but in times of political or drastic regime change, the fragility, uncertainty, and deception of everyday reality become clear⁶³. In time, all constructs are proven to be temporary; they can be changed, they can be forgotten: ideological notions, criteria, norms, monuments, myths, the old truth – everything can be destroyed and replaced – everlasting is an illusion⁶⁴. Even the life of a historical monument is not as predictable as it seems: “the erection and removal of monuments involve not only ‘physics’ but also ‘metaphysics’”⁶⁵. In this sense, memories mediate spatial transformations.⁶⁶

Nonetheless, while everlasting may be an illusion, shifting and impermanent realities do not translate as entirely collapsible at any given moment, *because we are still here*. Because cities are amalgams of buildings and people⁶⁷, not just one or the other, and places are always articulations of social relations that may decay or renew over time, without fixed meaning. These same shifting articulations are the very foundation of a place's identity – being then place-bound, but not place-based⁶⁸. It is by using it, living in it, and experiencing the built environment that memories are made and start to give a place one of its many possible identities. One of the many possible identities, because there

57 Le Goff 1990

58 Blokland 2001

59 Borges 2017

60 Le Goff 1990

61 Borges 2017

62 Sassen 2002

63 Ježernik 1998

64 Ježernik 1998

65 Ježernik 1998, p.587

66 Certeau 1984

67 Kostof 1991

68 Blokland 2001

is no single past, but rather multiple pasts coexisting in the palimpsest city, permeating the present and, at times, diverging substantially from one group to another⁶⁹. Physical heritage by itself is not enough to forge real identities, to get past the pastiches of historical places manufactured for the sake of a cheap touristic attraction or downright authoritarian control. However powerful the material evidence may be, the collective remembering is still an action⁷⁰, capable of resisting processes of commodification.

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69 Graham 2002; Smith 2006

70 Blokland 2001

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Urban Fragments

Between Citizenship and Consumption

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Artist Statement

The historical idea of the city in Western culture has long been closely linked to the concept of citizenship. From the Greek polis to the modern European city, urban space was understood as a place where citizens

could meet, interact, and participate in the shaping of collective life. Streets, markets, squares, and neighborhoods formed the spatial foundation of civic identity and community.

In many contemporary urban environments, however, this relationship between the city and citizenship appears increasingly fragile. Urban space is often shaped by economic investment, tourism, and large-scale events rather than by everyday civic practices. Global financial architecture, commercial districts, and festival infrastructures increasingly define the visual and spatial character of city centres.

This shift also changes how people inhabit urban space. Where older urban imaginaries emphasised proximity, neighbourhood life, and shared routines, many present-day city cores are organised around short-term presence: visitors, event audiences, and transient flows. Even when people

gather, participation can become more performative than civic, structured by curated experiences, commercial formats, and decisions made by limited institutional or private actors, rather than by citizens themselves.

This photographic essay reflects on fragments of these transformations across different European urban contexts. Some images depict corporate skylines and contemporary architectural landmarks that signal the dominance of global economic forces. Others show markets, restaurants, and urban festivities where public space becomes intertwined with consumption and spectacle.

At the same time, quieter scenes of empty streets, narrow passages, and human-scale urban details reveal another dimension of the city-spaces that still carry traces of older urban structures oriented toward everyday life. These images suggest both continuity and loss: the persistence of urban form, and the weakening of the social relations that once animated it.

By juxtaposing these urban moments, the project asks a question that has become increasingly relevant in contemporary urban theory: if the city is no longer primarily organised around the needs and agency of its citizens, what remains of its civic meaning?

Rather than offering a definitive answer, the photographs invite reflection on the tension between different urban logics: the city as a place of belonging, encounter, and lived routines, and the city as a landscape of investment, tourism, and programmed spectacle.



Figure 1: Urban consumption and global finance intersect in the contemporary city. London - Southwark, United Kingdom, 2018



Figure 2: Contemporary urban plazas often function as flexible event spaces shaped by large-scale development. Frankfurt - Europaviertel, Germany, 2023



Figure 3: Seasonal urban gatherings transform historic city squares into spaces of spectacle and tourism. Stockholm - Stortorget, Sweden, 2021



Figure 4: *Temporary installations and events redefine how public space is used in modern cities. London - South Kensington, United Kingdom, 2020*



Figure 5: *A quiet historic street at night evokes the older idea of the city as a place of everyday life. Lund - Sweden, 2019*



Figure 6: Human-scale passages and stairs preserve traces of the traditional urban fabric. Zurich - Lindenhof, Switzerland, 2018



Figure 7: Residential density and everyday urban life beyond the tourist city centre. Malaga - La Malagueña, Spain, 2022

Author Bio

Faranak Tiba is a digital designer based in Sweden with a background in graphic design and visual communication. Photography is a personal practice through which she observes cities and everyday urban life. She is particularly interested in how people move through urban spaces, how they interact with one another, and how architecture and design shape the atmosphere of a place. Her photographs capture moments that reveal different faces of contemporary cities.

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La Grande Bouffe

Isabel Engelmann

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In my photographic work, I search for the cracks in the polished image of the modern city. We all sense it: city centers are becoming unaffordable, and luxurious spaces are reserved for a small elite. With my series *La Grande Bouffe*, however, I did not want to produce a theoretical treatise, but rather to tell stories—moments of appropriation in which people reclaim the space – a space of belonging - that is actually denied to them.



Figure 1 *The Bored Ladies*

My images function like a small dramaturgy, a triptych of contemporary existence. In *The Bored Ladies*, I stage a scene reminiscent of a classical vanitas still life. It is a moment of “co-presence in abundance” that nevertheless carries a strange emptiness: the protagonists are physically present, yet they appear like isolated consumers—together in one place, but not truly forming a community.



Figure 2 *Men's Conversations*

The gaze then shifts to *Men's Conversations – Les Connaisseurs*. Here I focus on the retreat into the private sphere. One can almost sense the heavy bouquet of the wine: fullness, elegance, charm, deep purple with violet reflections, a dense palate and a sharp bouquet. In the midst of this decadent opulence, a woman sits on the table, her presence marked by a distinct eroticism—yet the men do not give her a single glance. They are so absorbed in their expert discussions that human proximity becomes secondary; it is the aesthetic retreat of the “happy few” into their own secluded world.



Figure 3 *The Grand Dinner*

The series concludes with *The Grand Dinner*. For me, this marks the key moment of the work: the performative appropriation of space. When the original spaces of the city are no longer affordable, we begin to search for alternatives. My protagonists do not wait



for permission; they bring their own banquet—food, champagne, wine, flowers, and candles—to transform the place into something beautiful on their own terms.

Within this staging, a crucial shift takes place: away from the mere representation of space towards a living, functional place. An anonymous setting becomes an improvised site of encounter. Here, genuine interaction suddenly becomes possible again—beyond price tags and exclusivity. In *La Grande Bouffe*, I tell a story about how creativity and community allow us to reclaim our own identity within the urban space.

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When the city breathes again

Resuscitation of a lost community

Sonja Bell
Galerie Bell in Baden-Baden

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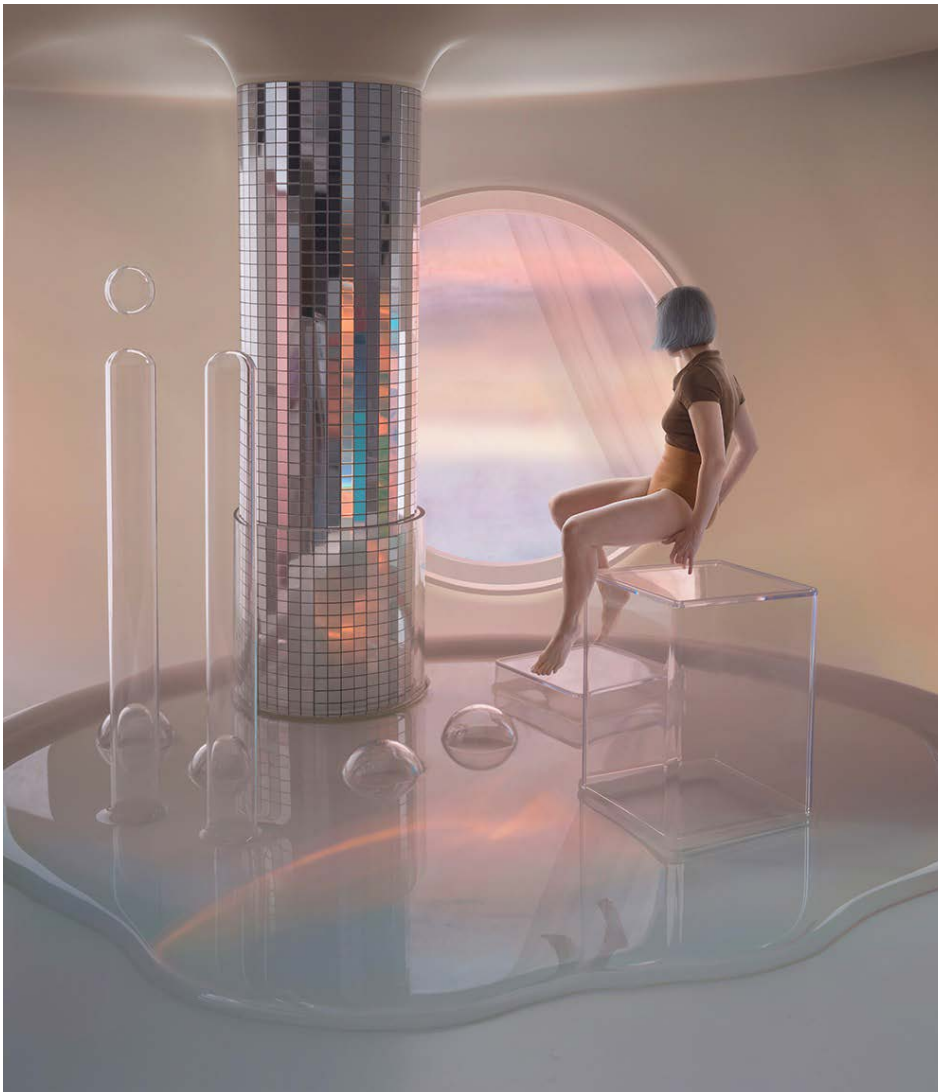


Figure 1 Katerina Belkina | *Solaris*, 2022



It was the end of winter, that time of year when cities often seem to be in a state of waiting. The days had grown longer, but life, already thinning out, did not seem to have decided to return yet. On this evening, however, an art space filled with people. Not fleetingly, not by chance, but with a quiet sense of self-evidence. Coats were taken off, glasses raised, conversations began – quietly at first, then more and more animatedly. What happened there was not sensational. And yet there was something astonishing about it. For a few hours, the city once again seemed like a place that is not just passed through, but inhabited. People stayed. They listened to each other. Strangers struck up conversations. There was a special intensity that might once have been called urban life – and which has become rare in many places today. This experience was not a nostalgic look back – it was present. It was more than just seeing and being seen. Warm embraces were accompanied by evasive manoeuvres in a colourful society where not everyone likes everyone else – and yet a connection cannot be denied. This exhibition opening gently touched a lonely nerve. The faces showed a liveliness that is often missing – but why is that?

The diagnosis is well known. City centres are losing their residents. Historic city centres are becoming backdrops for short-term use, investment or tourist performances. Living space is becoming scarce, life is shifting to the periphery. What remains are zones of transit: shopping streets without shops, squares without people, architecture without connection.

At the same time, new forms of public sphere are emerging in the digital world. Social media promises exchange, visibility and participation. But this public space remains disembodied. It knows no closeness, no hesitation, no shared silence. Encounter is replaced by reaction, dialogue by commentary, community by algorithm. What is missing is a space in which people not only exist but also interact with one another – a space in which closeness and distance, voice and silence are possible at the same time. The city has lost these spaces, at least in many of its physical manifestations.

PUBLIC SPACES WITHOUT THE PUBLIC

The classic concept of the Western city was based on the idea of public space: the market square, the forum, the salon. Places where citizens were not only present, but also involved. Places where a sense of belonging was formed – not through identity politics, but through shared experience. Many listed squares still exist physically, but they have lost their social function. Squares are traffic areas, cafés are transit stations, city centres are investment spaces. What is missing are places where people are allowed to linger rather than consume. Not to buy, but to stay. Not to perform, but to show themselves as they are. If active citizenship is more than protest or voting – if it requires relationship, conversation and mutual perception – then it needs spaces that enable precisely that.

And this is precisely where the question of the role of culture and art begins.

ART SPACES AS A LIVING PUBLIC SPHERE

Art spaces are not new places. And yet they are rarely seen as what they can be at their best: functioning public spaces. Not in an administrative sense, but in a social sense. Visiting an exhibition is voluntary. It is not algorithmically controlled. It requires time, presence and attention. People enter without knowing what to expect. They share a space without having to share an opinion. They encounter each other through something else – a work, a thought, an irritation. It is precisely this openness that makes art spaces rare places in the present day. They are ambiguous, inefficient and not scalable. But they enable something that is increasingly lacking in everyday urban life: resonance.

Art is often interpreted either aesthetically or politically. However, its social power often lies in the situation it creates. An art opening is not a political event in the traditional sense. And yet, for a few hours, it creates a form of public space that recalls the original idea of the city. People of different backgrounds, ages and perspectives meet without an agenda. Conversations arise not out of obligation, but out of curiosity.

Katerina Belkina's work 'For All Mankind' – an outside view of community



Figure 2 Katerina Belkina | *Roadside Picnic*, 2022

The work of Russian artist Katerina Belkina in her series *For All Mankind* offers a remarkable addition to this question. Belkina's figures appear distant, often fragmented. They stand alone in space – like isolated elements in a world that has forgotten how to live in community. And yet they carry within them a quiet longing for connection: for wholeness, for belonging, for a life beyond loneliness and fragmentation. The series does not depict an idealised community. Rather, it reflects the turmoil of our times – a time in which cities are losing their places, digital public spaces are replacing real encounters, and people nevertheless long for connection.



Figure 3 Katerina Belkina | *Mars*, 2023

Belkina's characters are individuals in a fragmented world. This is precisely where their universal dimension lies: the desire for an "All Mankind", for a place where people can meet in their diversity without losing their independence.



Figure 4 Katerina Belkina | *Moonrise* 2022

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL CONTACT

Digital spaces have made many things easier. However, they have also displaced something: the importance of the body in social interaction. Closeness, distance, gaze, voice – none of these things can be fully digitised. Art spaces, on the other hand, are physical spaces. You move around in them, stand still, step closer. These seemingly simple actions structure experience and create a form of commonality that is not based on equality, but on shared experience.

SMALL SPACES, BIG IMPACT

Grand urban visions often fail due to their own complexity. Master plans and strategies remain abstract. What works, on the other hand, are concrete places: spaces that are used, encounters that take place. Museums, galleries and studios can be such places – not as prestige projects, but as everyday social infrastructure. They don't have to be big. But they must be accessible and taken seriously. The experience of that winter evening showed that it doesn't take much to make urban life tangible. A space, an occasion and the willingness to get involved. When cities become products, they lose their citizens. When they are understood as spaces for relationships, however, something else emerges: responsibility, belonging, identification. Art can help to change this perspective –



not by beautifying cities, but by making them habitable again. As places where people can show themselves. Where people listen. Where people stay. Perhaps the future of the city is not in new technologies or taller buildings, but in rediscovering a simple yet ambitious idea: that cities arise where people meet. What if we no longer regarded art spaces as a marginal phenomenon of urban life, but as its seismograph? What if we could use them to explore not only culture, but also a new form of citizenship - in all its nuances? The answer to this question is open. But perhaps it begins precisely where a space fills up, conversations arise and the city breathes again for a moment.

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