Urban Ecologies: An Introduction

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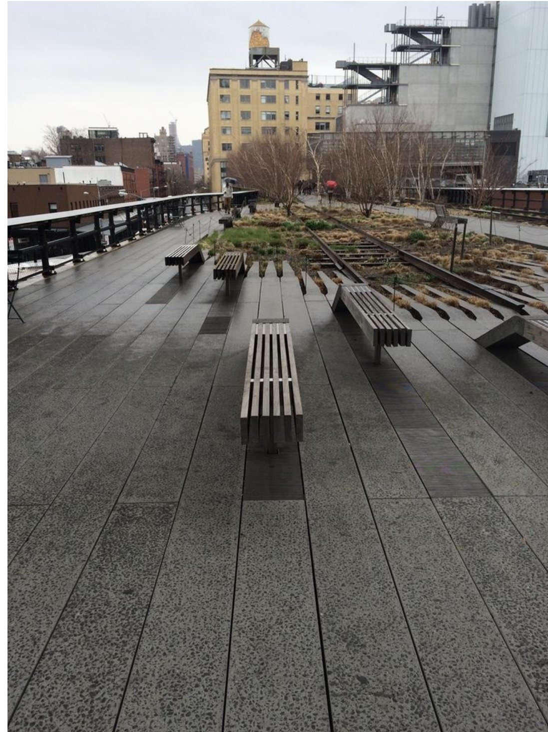
The High Line, New York City, April 3, 2015 © Catrin Gersdorf

The image that provides the visual epigraph to this "Introduction" to the special section on urban ecologies is a photo I took when I walked the High Line, "New York City's park in the sky" (David/Hammond), on cool, drizzly day in early April 2015. Dominated by steel, wood, brick, glass, and concrete, this vista shows no traces of living matter, no plants, no animals, not even any human beings engaged in the frenzy of their daily business. It seems the quintessential spatial representation of urbanity, a space defined by architecture and language, not by nature or geography. Traditionally, the city is associated with processes of replacing rather than harboring the natural and the wild. In its idealized form, the city symbolizes what Yi-Fu Tuan has described as the human tendency to seek to "escape" the vagaries of nature. In such an imaginary, urban spaces are conceived as bulwarks against "nature's undependability and violence" (Tuan 1998: 10). They protect, shield, and separate the human from the non-human, the civilized from the wild. In such a scenario, the city's liberatory promise rests in its potential "to overthrow the tyranny of nature" (Benton-Short & Short 5).

But isn't this very distinction between the urban and the wild, between environments created and inhabited by humans, and environments created by natural forces and inhabited by non-human animals, plants, and other living creatures, an expression of our anthropocentric myopia? As German biologist and nature writer Bernhard Kegel reminds us in *Tiere in der Stadt: Eine Naturgeschichte* (2014; *Animals in the City: A Natural History*), almost every place on earth is inhabited by organisms, and

they include the beautiful and the ugly, the obnoxious and the admirable, the charismatic and the disgusting, the wonderful and the dangerous. The High Line is not exempt from such presences. But in order for us to see them, we need to readjust the viewfinder. Just turning 180° may produce a different picture:



The High Line, New York City, April 3, 2015 © Catrin Gersdorf

Suddenly the trees are there, the bushes and the grass, competing with the architecture and the flagstones, pushing into the foreground and claiming their place in the city. One could actually join Walter Benjamin's flâneur and, literally, go "botanizing," if not on the asphalt, then in the vestiges of old railroad tracks.[1]

A shift in perspective may add a distinctly material dimension to *urban ecology*, a concept that first emerged in the early 20th century when urban sociologists, mostly of the Chicago School of Sociology, used it metaphorically in descriptions of the city as a complex living organism. With the publication of *Contemporary Urban Ecology* (1977), the outcome of joint research efforts of urban sociologist Brian J.L. Berry and urban geographer John D. Kasarda, the emphasis shifted to adopting the methodological approach of an ecological inquiry. As Berry and Kasarda stated: "The basic premise of the ecological approach is that, as a population develops an effective organization, it improves its chances of survival in its environment" (qtd. in Poston 1006).[2]

During the same decade, biologists began to study the existence of plants and animals in cities, thus drawing attention to the presence of non-human life in an

[1] I have discussed Walter Benjamin's figure of the flâneur and flânerie as ecocritical practice in more detail elsewhere. See Gersdorf 2013.

[2] More recently, Kasarda has envisioned the future city in purely commercial terms, as *Aerotropolis*—the city that is built to meet commercial rather than ecological needs.

environment otherwise perceived as the spatial and organizational epitome of human societies. Kegel's work cited above stands in that tradition, one that follows a similar path as the research of environmental historians such as William Cronon and Martin Melosi, and urban geographers such as Matthew Gandy as well as Lisa Benton-Short and John Rennie Short. All of these scholars have contributed to our understanding of the city as part of "a society-environment dialectic" (Benton-Short & Short 4), one in which "the city is an integral part of nature and nature is intimately interwoven into the social life of cities" (5). Or as Gandy suggests, "the production of modern cities has altered the relationship between nature and society in a series of material and symbolic dimensions" (Gandy 5). But he also insists that "alternative modernities […] vie for representation in the urban landscape, as different conceptions of meaning and identity are etched into the fabric of the city" (5). Gandy's use of words such as *fabric*, *representation*, *etch*, and *urban landscape* reveal his way of thinking about the city as a space defined by both materiality *and* textuality. Much like Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja he approaches the space of the city *literally*, as the material reality that shapes modernity, and *literarily* (or poetically), as a text that encodes the truth about modernity. This brings me back to my visit to the High Line.

Interested in the changing relationship between nature and the city, I had loosely followed the development of that project for almost a decade before I actually had a chance to be and move in that post-industrial, post-modern space myself. Before the elevated train tracks, stretching over roughly twenty blocks in midtown Manhattan, were retrofitted into a now popular recreational area for New Yorkers and their guests, they were known as the West Side Line. Back in 1847, the tracks were laid on street level along 10th Avenue for the purpose of shipping freight. In 1929, the state of New York, the city, and the New York Central Railroad agreed on a plan to build a viaduct in order to decrease the number of traffic accidents along the Line and improve the safety in one of the city's busiest commercial districts. The Line opened in 1934. By midcentury, trucks had started to dominate the freight shipping business. The last train ran on the High Line in 1980, "pulling three carloads of frozen turkeys" (Friends of the High Line website). For almost two decades, hardly anybody seems to have paid particular attention to a slowly disintegrating monument to the industrial city. Plant seeds took root along the old tracks and created a linear wilderness in New York City's urban grid—a form of spontaneous self-generation that created a rough beauty captured in the images of photographer Joel Sternfeld (see "NYC Parks: The High Line" on the Museum of the City's website). In 1999 Joshua David and Robert Hammond, residents in the High Line neighborhood, founded Friends of the High Line and began to advocate the structure's preservation and use as a public space. Successful in soliciting the support of the City of New York, the initiative gained traction and eventually the first section was opened to the public on June 9, 2009. Since then, most of the structure has been transformed into a space whose industrial past functions as a frame for its horticultural present and future.

Yet on my April walk, when spring had just started to assert its seasonal rights, most of the plants in the High Line had barely begun to awaken from their wintry hiatus. Their lusciousness was a promise rather than an insistent materiality, their physical

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presence in a space that was still defined by the commercial and residential infrastructures of the modern city symbolic rather than competitive. From a semiotic perspective, the plants in their clearly delineated beds have a function not unlike that of the word that gave a name to a black wooden shack located under a covered bridge stretching across the High Line: terroir. As I learned later, "terroir" was (and still is) the name of "the world's best wine bar" (wineisterroir.com), which makes sense, given how important that mix of soil, topography, and climate is for producing a wine's distinct character. However, at the time I just saw a word that reminded the visitor of the nature underneath the urban superstructure; a word foreign to the lexicon of the official language spoken in one of the world's largest cities; a word that perhaps was part of an environmental art installation. A word that ultimately made me wonder whether the grasses, bushes, trees, and flowers on the High Line were just that—pieces in an environmental art installation. But no matter what the answer, both the word (and what it represents) and the plants (as well as the animal life they support), have become an integral part of New York City's urban ecology. Referencing the geological foundation of human existence (the ground on which cultures may or may not thrive) as well as a cultural institution such as the wine bar, *terroir* serves the pleasures of body *and* mind. So do the plants that provide a space and a microclimate that may help to make life in the most human of all environments tolerable while at the same time reminding us of the existential proximity of our non-human neighbors.

How does the High Line fare in comparison to New York City's Central Park? Established in 1857, Central Park was built to provide urbanites with an environment whose landscaped features denied, or at least concealed the city. Inserted into the rectangular geometry of New York's urban grid, it simultaneously emphasized and undermined what Bruno Latour has described as modernity's project of 'purification' and 'translation'. While the grid sought to "purify" modern human culture of the seeming irrationality of wild nature, the design of Central Park imitated and simultaneously translated wilderness into a recreational asset for a growing urban population. Gandy has aptly summarized the "political rationale" behind the nineteenth-century interest in creating city parks: "public health and social order" (Gandy 104). Inspired by an ethic that combined the preservation of nature with that of human health and social peace, Central Park also served the economic logic of real estate development, raising the financial value of adjacent property.[3] Today, we would perhaps perceive the creation of Central Park as a form of gentrification, given that the squatters' shacks that one could still find in the vicinity of the Central Park site in 1862 (cf. Gandy 90) were eventually removed and replaced by more stately buildings. And certainly, the creation of the High Line Park in midtown Manhattan raised at least one pair of skeptical eyebrows. In an op-ed for the *New York Times* published on August 21, 2012, Jeremiah Moss called it several names: "a catalyst for some of the most rapid gentrification in the city's history," "the home of a neatnik with expensive tastes, afraid I would soil the furnishings," and a

[3] For a more detailed discussion of these issues see Gandy, Chapter 2 "Symbolic Order and the Urban Pastoral." For a more detailed discussion of the relation between the city, nature, and the concept of the grid see my essay "Nature in the Grid: American Literature, Urbanism, and Ecocriticism" (2010).

"snake" "destroying neighborhoods as it grows" and doing so "by design." Moss reports that property values around the High Line increased 103 percent between 2003 and 2011, dramatically changing the character of West Chelsea, which used to be "a mix of working-class residents and light-industrial business" (*NYT* online). Realities like this are now "etched into the fabric" of New York City. Perhaps the *terroir* on the High Line should be recognized as one of the major signatures of urban post-modernity, located at the opposite end of the global scale of urbanity from the *favelas* in Brazil and other similar post-colonial places on this planet.

In light of the problematic social and political narratives it has come to support and the gentrified reality it has helped to create, can we still cite the High Line as an urban artifact that acknowledges the presence of non-human life in the history of the modern city? Is the High Line so radically different from Central Park, a space that was located outside the city limits when it was first created in the nineteenth century, but now, in the twenty-first, interrupts the regularity of the grid and invites visitors with a philosophical inclination to critically contemplate the relationship between the city and its most prominent park? Or do we have to look for images of an alternative urbanity elsewhere, in fiction, poetry, art, and popular culture?

Whatever the answer, these and similar questions inspired *Ecozon@*'s call for contributions to a special section on "Urban Ecologies." The idea was also to give another push to the study of urbanity within ecocriticism, a mode of inquiry within literary and cultural studies that began to emerge in the mid-1990s, has since developed into a vibrant field within the humanities all over the world. For a long time Ecocriticism was fixated on the study of nature and wilderness as well as on the investigation of texts and genres devoted to what could be summarized as ecological, or environmental consciousness raising. Attempts to embrace the study of real and imagined urban environments as a legitimate ecocritical project are few and far between. The first milestone on ecocriticism's path to the city was Michael Bennett and David W. Teague's *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* (1999), a collection of essays that addressed issues such as "The Nature of Cities," "Urban Nature Writing," "City Parks" as well as conceptual intersections of race, gender, urbanity, and wilderness, and that closed with a section on "theorizing urban space." As Bennett and Teague wrote in the introduction, the volume had two major purposes: 1) "to point to the self-limiting conceptualizations of nature, culture, and environment built into many ecocritical projects by their exclusion of urban places;" and 2) "to remind city dwellers of our placement within ecosystems and the importance of this fact for understanding urban life and culture" (4).

A little more than ten years later, Stefan L. Brandt, Winfried Fluck, and Frank Mehring edited *Transcultural Spaces: Challenges of Urbanity, Ecology, and the Environment* (2010). Its publication by a German academic press and its placement in a series devoted to "Research in English and American Literature" may account for the book's invisibility in the international community of ecocritics. Among the essays in this volume that may be of interest beyond the disciplinary confines of North American Studies is Lawrence Buell's "Nature and City: Antithesis or Symbiosis?" Buell discusses

"six metaphors for encapsulating the place of nature in relation to cities: metaphors upon which both theory and fiction have often drawn," and that "operate" by an aesthetic logic originally described by Paul Ricoeur and summarized by Buell as an oscillation between "abstracting us away from the factical object [...] and retrieving it with a richer heuristic plenitude" (Buell 5). These metaphors that shape the ways in which we think and imagine urbanity are "the city-nature binary" (5); the city as body or "macro-organism" (7); "city as palimpsest" (8); "city as fragmentary assemblage" (11), as "network" (13), and, finally, as "apocalypse" (14). Buell's list provides the urban ecocritic with a valuable tool for analyzing literary and cultural texts of all genres and for assessing their function in the production of real and imagined urban spaces.

Three publications that have come out just recently herald a possible renaissance in urban ecocriticism. In 2015, Mark Luccarelli and Sigurd Bergmann edited *Spaces In-Between: Cultural and Political Perspectives on Environmental Discourse*, a volume that contains several essays looking at urban design, urban planning, urban gardening, and the creation of urban parks as practices that produce spaces "between the social and the natural" (15). The year 2016 saw the publication of Ursula K. Heise's essay "Terraforming for Urbanists" and Christopher Schliephake's book on *Urban Ecologies: City Space, Material Agency, and Environmental Politics in Contemporary Culture*. Both scholars are interested in identifying literary and cultural texts that provide cognitive models for overcoming crusted images and concepts of the city as "an antithesis to nature or a biological wasteland" and, instead, envision it "as itself a form of nature" (Heise 11). Heise finds one such example in Kim Stanley Robinson's sci-fi novel *2312* (2012), a narrative that suggests at least one addition to Buell's list of urban metaphors: terraforming. The other prominent example she discusses is Harriet Mullen's *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary* (2013), a book of poetry that reimagines Los Angeles as a space that is not only defined by urban sprawl and congested freeways but also by hummingbirds, giant hibiscus flowers, and "a profusion of oleanders" (Mullen qtd. in Heise 21). Drawing on Hubert Zapf's conceptualization of cultural ecology, Schliephake (who is also a contributor to this special section) embarks on the project of analyzing "examples taken from contemporary culture dealing with urban life and the complex interrelations between urban communities and their (natural and built) environments" (Schliephake xiii). Like Heise, he looks for a language and for images that articulate the city differently—as a reality shaped by the discourses of space, materiality, environmental politics, and, last but not least, literary and popular culture. In Schliephake's book, "urban ecology" becomes an epistemological tool for deconstructing the city-nature binary and a critical practice that participates in creating "a new 'image' of the city," one that moves us beyond the perception of the city as "some strange other, an ugly concrete stain on an otherwise beautiful landscape" (xvi).

The essays collected in this special section follow a similar critical program: to one degree or another, they all use literature and film as a diagnostic tool for understanding the history of the city in the modern imagination, or as a resource for fueling new ideas and concepts of urbanity; and they investigate the effects of storytelling on the material reality of urban space and urban life. The section opens with Rachel Nisbet's essay on

"James Joyce's Urban EcoAnarchism." Taking *Finnegans Wake* (1939) as the object of her critical analysis and drawing intertextual connections to the work of Italian philosopher Giambatista Vico, Nisbet makes a strong argument for the presence of ecological thought in conceptualizations of the city since the Enlightenment, while at the same time pointing at the significance of urban ecology in the development of modernist literary aesthetics. Christopher Schliephake's essay "From Green to Brown Landscapes" links a historical narrative about the "the changes that have occurred in our urban landscapes (and our cultural images of them) since the age of industrialization" with a discussion of the work of American visual artist Alex Grey and South-Korean filmmaker Hae-jun Lee's *Cast Away on the Moon* (2009). Schliephake argues that through their work, both artists offer "new ways of conceptualizing cities as integral parts of a living, interactive biosphere." María Isbael Pérez Ramos looks at the effects of the climatological and geographical condition of the arid and semi-arid Southwest of the United States on imagining an urban future for that particular region. All three novels under investigation in her contribution – two published in the early 1990s (Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Rudolfo Anaya's *Alburquerque*) and one in 2015 (Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*) – represent urban ecologies as dystopias, spaces that are characterized by the social and economic injustices resulting from neo-liberal, profit-oriented modes of managing the region's water resources. Yet as Pérez Ramos shows, even in narratives grounded on apocalyptic metaphors, novelists offer glimpses of the possibility for alternative urban futures. The last contribution, Chris Pak's essay on "Terraforming and the City," takes a closer look at narratives and images of future cities from H.G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), to Frederick Turner's epic poem *Genesis* (1988) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1992-1996). Discussing these literary texts within the conceptual framework of the Anthropocene, he argues that "images of animals, plants and bacteria are fundamental to the way terraforming narratives" conceptualize future cities.

As all four essays demonstrate, the process of thinking urbanity in relation to questions of ecology, environmentality, and the future of human existence began at least a century ago. To focus on urbanity may still smack of anthropocentrism, an ideology that privileges humans and their needs and desires. Nevertheless, ecocriticism cannot afford to ignore that, perhaps with the exception of viruses and bacteria, humans are a species that has the most lasting effect on the organic and anorganic foundations of life. Nor are we, as a species, anywhere near extinction. In order for us to continue life on planet Earth and not to succumb to fantasies of human existence on other planets, we need to rethink the ways in which we take up and occupy space. In the late 1960s, architect Paolo Soleri introduced the term arcology, a concept that imagined the spatial future of human collectives as being defined by *arc*hitecture and ec*ology*. Arcology "proposes a highly integrated and compact three-dimensional urban form that is the opposite of urban sprawl with its inherently wasteful consumption of land, energy resources and time, and tendency to isolate people from each other and the community" ("What is Arcology?" on the arcosanti.org website). At the core of such thinking is a reconceptualization of urbanity as a mode of life that sustains what German philosopher

Andreas Weber recently called a "culture of enlivenment" (66). Such a culture can unfold "in highly diverse contexts—traditional societies, indigenous cultures, Internet culture, urban spaces, land and water management, and many others" (42). For Weber, "self-organised communities of people" (42) are the precondition of an ecologically as well as socially and politically sustainable future. He is convinced that such communities "are bypassing the NeoDarwinian/neoliberal model by inventing their own, novel forms of self-provisioning and governance" (42). With this special section we want to suggest that in the twenty-first century, the preservation of the world may no longer be in wildness alone, but in new visions of urbanity.

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