

The possible city: On dismantling *Infrastructure* to make *Interstice* habitable for all life forms

Tomás Criado, Open University of Catalonia

Keynote presentation at the international seminar *Interspecies City*
April 29, 2026. CCCB, Barcelona.

Abstract

Although the genealogy of the term 'public space' is relatively recent, its material form has deeper roots and can be read as part of what could be called a modern Euro-American mode of building cities. Drawing from Egin Isin's work public space can be read as part of a genealogy of the city as a 'machine of difference,' laying out distinct figures of citizenship, founded on an analysis of their alterities. Here, I offer an update to Isin's typology in the form of a 'tale of two cities,' one attempting to make it face the conditions of our urban present. The first I will call *Infrastructure*, the existent city at the end of the modern world: one that divides, spatializes, and segregates bodies and beings according to notions of hygiene and modernist governmentality. I exemplify through the historical treatment of pavements, rats, dogs and trees, as well as disabled people. I argue that this form of urban infrastructuration offers nothing more than a 'conditional inclusion' to human-centric welfare. The focus on devising infrastructural solutions (hard surfaces or similar brutal forms of urban emplacement) has contributed to new forms of othering, exposing a wide plurality of urban bodies to uninhabitable milieus, further eroding the welcoming and gathering functions of public space. The second city it's called *Interstice*: the possible city yet to come, sadly visible because of as well as subjugated by *Infrastructure*. Intervening in this domain of infrastructural solutionism, I foreground activist, artistic and pedagogical projects where multispecies urban landscapes appear less as an infrastructure and more as interstices of urban habitability: where different forms of coexistence between human and non-human bodies can be explored and supported.

1. Introduction

Although the genealogy of the term 'public space' and its usage in professional discourse can be said to be relatively recent (Curnier, 2022), as an amateur urban historian I believe its material form has deeper roots. In fact, I'd like to propose that most of our notions of public space respond rather to what I wish to call a Euro-American mode of building cities (Criado, 2026), loosely present in many modernisation projects both in the metropolises and the colonies since the 19th century. Even if public space's main contemporary articulations foreground ideas of conviviality and togetherness, I wish to take issue with how their materialisations affect deeply the possibility of building interspecies cities or providing 'access' to all life forms.

If you decided to follow me along the path of that myth of origins, I might continue by saying that this Euro-American mode of building is usually presented in design schools worldwide, as an object of export and circulation, through a mythical story similar to the one that follows: thanks to the technical prowess of hard-working urban designers, our muddy, foggy and dirty cities full of miasmas have been finally properly organised, deeply intervened and regulated, from top to bottom, opening up what once were medieval dense villages into ample cathedrals for cars and pedestrians (Blomley, 2011; Norton, 2008).

In some of the more hopeful tales, public space design has intriguingly been discussed as a democratic practice, a task of laying out the agoras of contemporary public life, becoming one design iteration after the other capacious enough to host us all (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2011). Hence fulfilling the dreams of urbanists like my father who aspired his practice could serve to provide architectural solutions for the public good, putting it in the service of citizen rights. But as many might be aware, this mythical tale is one ripe in many oblivions.

In his book *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship*, political scientist Engin Isin (2002) provided us with the necessary antidote to this linear history of Western virtue. His book put forward this through two brilliant operations. First, he conceptualised the city as a 'difference machine': not merely a passive container but a process of actively assembling, generating and differentiating social groups. Interestingly, his is a story where citizenship is never a neutral category, but one that always has a constitutive alterity: since every hegemonic assemblage of citizenship in a particular time, produces its outsiders.

Second, he offered a non-orientalist genealogy of ideal-type cities, foregrounding their figurations of otherness: for instance, being a citizen in the Greek *Polis* was defined against women, peasants, and the slaves; in the medieval *Christianopolis*, it was the guild that articulated who got to be or not a citizen; with the industrial age, the *Metropolis* produced the worker-citizen and the *flâneur*, while categorising the urban fringe as dangerous classes or savages. And the contemporary *Cosmopolis* is shaped by entrepreneurial professionalisation, creating new frontiers of struggle for refugees, immigrants, and the homeless.

However, despite the heuristic relevance of Isin's (2002) typology, his genealogy tragically doesn't consider two important contemporary matters that our dear audience will surely have noticed: on the one hand, it disregards the very materialisation of cities as a story of *Flesh and Stone*, to paraphrase Richard Sennett's (1996) famous book title; and, on the other hand, even if his history of figurations of inclusion and exclusion foregrounds the human beings being treated in certain

moments of history as subhumans, it forgets the wide variety of other ‘nonhuman’ beings—animals, bacteria, or insects—populating our cities.

Leaving aside the hermeneutic attempt at understanding why Isin’s erudite monograph forgot any mention to those, in what follows, I would like to attempt to offer a different typology: one considered from the inclusions and exclusions delineated in the construction of Euro-American public spaces. In fact, since every genealogy is, in a certain Foucauldian sense, a history of its own present, I think a more accurate declaration of my intentions for doing this is needed.

As we are all too aware, our present is defined by what Bruno Latour (2017) describes as an unprecedented climatic mutation, as well as the many earthly crisis it is bringing to the fore, also including a rather plausible Sixth Mass Extinction. In view of this many headed monster that many are attempting to name—Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantacioncene, etc.—, perhaps it’s time to put my rather amateurish urban historian hat aside and wear the one that I feel more comfortable with—the anthropologist interested in contemporary urban ecological affairs. The tragedy of our situation is that our Euro-American mode of building has played a key part in this conundrum (Criado, 2026). In fact, the contemporary dominant mode of understanding and building public space is thwarting, when not destroying, the very attempts at building a more inclusive city for a plurality of beings.

Whereas Euro-American modern urbanism sought to instil in us the belief that public space amounted to ‘inclusion’, ‘access’ or ‘rights’, I am afraid nothing of the like will happen to many humans and other-than-humans unless we consider the non-intended effects of its particularly infrastructural mode of building: I’m invoking here Anna Tsing and her collaborators’ (2021) sense of the destructive, unintended effects of modern infrastructures on the web of interdependences of life, not focusing on sole species but in the interactions constitutive of holobionts. My contention is that only by identifying how infrastructures limit the possibility of holobiont life, we could attempt public space to deliver a much sought-after multispecies ‘conviviality’, ‘access’ and ‘care’, even if we should not forget that sometimes ‘cohabitation’ also means learning to live apart.

To do so, in what follows I will offer an update to Isin’s typology, attempting to make it face the conditions of our urban present. Please sit calmly and allow me to tell you a tale of two cities. The first I will call *Infrastructure*, the existent city at the end of the modern world. The second you might have heard in your dreams, or you might have imagined in your activist practice, it’s called *Interstice*: the possible city yet to come, sadly visible because of as well as subjugated by Infrastructure.

2. Infrastructure: The existent city at the end of the (modern) world

Welcome to Infrastructure. Or, like they say in the maps: You are here! Look around, you are well immersed in it. All set, well arranged, tightly infrastructured. But what is it that defines it?

2.1. Paving Infrastructure

Stepping outside of this building, the most immediate material reality you encounter—the very stage upon which our public life unfolds—is the pavement. We often treat walking as an act of material oblivion, assuming the ground is a silent, permanent backdrop. But look down: you are standing on a highly engineered crust. To understand Infrastructure, we must first understand the ground that supports it.

This ground is the result of what philosopher Manuel de Landa (2000) in his *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* calls a long history of urban mineralization. Over centuries, human societies have worked out different forms of an urban exoskeleton, hardening the earth into bricks, stone, and asphalt to sediment our routines and modes of being. Pavements lie at the core of this process. Since the 19th century, pavements have literally become the building blocks of the modernist architecture most contemporary humans inhabit (Criado, 2024a). This mineralization was indeed framed as a matter of hygiene and, increasingly, the expansion of urban rights to many urban dwellers, concomitant with the advent of automobilities.

In such milieu, pavements were distributed in zones and designed to provide levelled, predictable surfaces, for cars to transit without bumps, but also so that the gentry wouldn't get their shoes muddy. This literally paved the way for the advent of a new historical figure, the *flâneur*—a body infrastructured for urban walking (Meulemans, 2022). Stemming from this figure of a white, bourgeois man, pavements have step by step been refashioned to welcome others in this respectable choir of figures of citizenship, as material indexes of a worry over social rights (Blomley, 2011). This logic was further refined through the lens of accessibility (Hamraie, 2017). The precise standardization of the sidewalk, with its ramps and podotactile surfaces, was meant to ensure that the city was a legible and navigable milieu for everyone, embodying the right to free circulation for a wide variety of human bodies.

As a result, in Infrastructure pavements have reached the status of a celebrated urban asset, essential to urban collective identity and central to its core value: Welfare. Design historian Danae Esparza (2017) tells this marvellously in her book *Barcelona a ras de suelo* (Barcelona at ground level). Whether through Gaudí's *panots* or the intricate work of Lisboa's *calceteiros*, these patterns are not merely decorative. Rather, they are part and parcel of a signature urban image that anchors the legible experience of the walker.

However, to approach the current predicaments of Infrastructure requires not just foregrounding the urban history of its epidermis—the detailed designs of paved streets, plazas and beaches, benches, lights that we usually tread on, sit or use in our walks—but also, and perhaps more importantly, excavating its guts: the foundations making our current urban milieus possible. One might think here of the tubes irrigating street trees, or the sanitation infrastructure evacuating rainfall and attempting to separate us from an infernal bottom of bacterial horrors (Harvey et al. 2016).

Indeed, the materialisation of democratic access that Infrastructure has sculpted into a frozen, mineralized landscape (Hutton, 2020) is now thwarting the possibility of a more shared interspecies city. The pavements that make the automobile and walkable city possible are the same force that suffocates the soil or turn the city into a true guardian of the heat island effect, degrading as well metabolic functions or, better, the interspecies lives of 'the great below.' By creating a thick crust for modern human mobility, Infrastructure has blocked us from enabling the intermingling of life, thwarting its growth and existence.

This is the sad story of how most modernist urban milieus have deeply 'terraformed' our planet (Duperrex, 2022). The crisis of this way of building is now so visible that the city of Infrastructure is full of activists and planners attempting to dismantle it. From initiatives that aim to de-pave our everyday terrains to architects unearthing the 'beach beneath the street,' there is a growing movement to introduce porous materials and restore soil intermingling. Could their attempts shift our modes of existence to deliver access and care for all forms of life, starting from the ground up?

2.2. *The subjugated lives of Others in Infrastructure*

Unfortunately, I think this will take much more than that, since Infrastructure is not just a material but a deeply cultural project. When attempting to sketch out Infrastructure as the more accurate contemporary addition to Engin Isin's (2002) genealogy of cities as difference machines, we shouldn't forget to carefully delineate the forms of alterity it brings forth: intriguingly well-delineated and chartable precisely because of Infrastructure's own networks of sensors, technicians and urban archives. Allow me to tell you a couple of stories on this well-traced alterity.

Here goes the first one: Once upon a time in Infrastructure, there was a building. In this building, there was a neighbour, and this neighbour had a palm tree that had grown so stubbornly it eventually broke the wall separating the property from a nearby public park. One day, in the communal WhatsApp group, this neighbour told us she had rats, a whole colony—two burrows and twenty rats—that had found a way through the cracks and climbed the facade as high as the third floor.

The news turned the building into a strange *Parliament of Nature* (Latour, 2004). The neighbour who shared the discovery immediately demanded that the community pay for a professional pest control service to have the rats exterminated. However, another neighbour stood as a representative for the rats, suggesting we use cages to catch them and move them elsewhere, rather than killing them. This plea for mercy was met with a condescending rebuttal from yet another neighbour, who shared official recommendations from Barcelona's Public Health Agency,¹ detailing the risks rats pose as vectors of diseases.

My partner and I also shared our two cents. We argued that if the rats were inside, it was because of a failure to take the necessary preventative measures. We insisted that our joint budget should not be used to simply exterminate them with poisons that would put the building's dogs and children at risk. Invoking examples of eco-friendly gardening approaches, we tried to make the others see that there are possibilities beyond the use of venoms. We urged our building community to focus on non-lethal exclusion strategies, like ultrasound devices, or non-poisonous measures like having a cat.

As you can imagine, the WhatsApp group became a floor for heated debate. But under the pressure of the infestation, a decision had to be made. As one neighbour put it, in an intervention that ended up closing the debate: "We think human health should go first, over environmental concerns." Many rallied behind that banner in a public vote, and that was it. In the end, despite all the attempts to find a way to relate to these other animals as residents rather than pests, the vote went against them. Not without shame I need to share that in the end, we killed the rats...

This is not an uncommon outcome here in Infrastructure. Human welfare is, indeed, what Infrastructure was built is for. Pigeons run a similar fate here in Infrastructure, fed with devices put in public spaces with the aim of sterilising them. And in the last year, wild pigs bearing the swine flu have also been exterminated without mercy in Infrastructure. Not all beings suffer the same fate as 'pests' (Lynteris, 2019), though. Two other beings stand apart in this story.

We tend to believe that 'Man's best friend,' considering the thousands of years of mutual evolution, might be of a different kind. And indeed, it is, but as environmental historian Chris Pearson (2021) documents in his thoroughly

¹ <https://www.aspb.cat/documents/rates-ratolins-que-cal-saber/>

researched book *Dogopolis*, this relationship also contains a frictional trajectory. Focusing on London, New York, and Paris, Pearson recounts the story of how urban dogs were forced to conform to middle-class paradigms of human health and sanitation in the same period as the first pavements of Infrastructure were being built. Between 1800 and the 1930s, the 'dog question' centred on managing behaviours like biting, straying, and defecating, which were increasingly viewed as sanitary hazards and affronts to 'civilised' order.

To ensure public safety and hygiene, authorities implemented a system of muzzling, quarantine, and the 'humane' elimination of millions of stray dogs. This process somehow shows that in modernist urbanism, these animals are subject to a 'conditional inclusion:' only welcome in the metropolis if groomed, leashed, predictable and civilised. The brutal story of those not fitting this mould is telling: they were branded as 'dangerous classes' and vectors of disease. The humanisation of dogs has, indeed, become less violent in time, and modernist governmentality has approached its regulations in the interest of dogs' welfare. But the human remains the frame. The canine integration into the modernist city cannot thus be considered a natural evolution of millenary friendship, but a calculated effort to harness and tame the dog's presence to fit the mould of Infrastructure's notions of human welfare.

But what about trees, you in the audience might ask, aren't they loved by the inhabitants of Infrastructure? Very much, and their presence is mostly welcome in those summer days when the sun is a killer, greeting us with their hosting branches so we can rest and grab a bite. But, again, sorry to be the party pooper once more: their trajectories within Infrastructure haven't been simple. The modernist planting of trees happened at the same time as the deployment of tarmac and asphalt for automobiles—damaging them many times beyond repair.

In her magnificent book *Seeing Trees*, focusing on New York City and Berlin, environmental historian Sonja Dümpelmann (2019) discusses the creation of what she terms 'model trees.' Following Dümpelmann, the history of the urban tree is one of living building blocks of increasingly tailored urban milieus. Beings whose whole life cycle is to serve an ecosystem function, replaced upon death, and with truncated ecological functions—they can't reproduce unless planted in the planned tree holes, not just for matters of aesthetics, but due to the fact that in the hard-surfaced paved milieus of Infrastructure, watering can only happen with infrastructures of irrigation.

I have recently begun excavating a very similar story in Barcelona—the city I am mostly thinking when considering Infrastructure—with my geographer colleague Albert Arias, where these beings are indeed on life-support: managed through scientific forestry to ensure uniformity and efficiency. Subject to expert selection, certain specimens are treated as ideal—straight, symmetrical, and hardy—while others beyond easy human control have tended to be discarded, like the smelly *Ailanthus*. There are, of course, compromises like the frequent use of *Platanus hispanica*, resistant and sturdy, but making matters complicated with the trees' most negative externality: pollen.

Come what may, as Dümpelmann discusses it, the story of the urban tree is one ripe in technical interventions, like surgical cavity filling and precise pruning, practices whereby the living tree was forced into planning shape. No longer self-sufficient, the inclusion of urban trees as inhabitants of Infrastructure situates them as dependent artificial creations, designed to serve human welfare.

The fate of trees and dogs as acceptable Others is telling when compared to the fraught lives of the rats and pigeons of Infrastructure, usually met with total

extermination or sterilisation. Dogs and trees are very much welcome onto the stage of public space—provided they behave! They have been made safe, but in doing so, Infrastructure only enables them to have a life subjugated to human needs.

As much as this defies some of our core modernist ideas, the groomed companion species and the model tree are not true partners in a shared city. Rather, they reveal the hierarchy of worth for different bodies situated along a continuum of projects of technically mediated inclusion: from special spaces for special bodies to a rather failed prospect of so-called ‘universal’ design (Hamraie, 2017).

3. Interstice: The possible city for all bodies, yet to come

I am aware of the bleakness of my addition to Isin’s typology of cities as difference machines. Infrastructure is no less than the city at the end of the modern world! If my intervention ended here, I understand you might not have any interest in talking to me again, as a bringer of bad news, yet another triggering storyteller of your doomscrolling solastalgia.

But hold on, don’t leave yet, because I would also like to tell you that Infrastructure is intriguingly not alone. There is another city attached to it: one that appears in certain glitches, glued to it, like the yoghurt that gets stuck to the cap when we try opening it. For want of a better term, I wish to call it with the rather pompous name of Interstice. Inters-what? Interstice, the space between!

Following the work of Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre, an “interstice is defined neither against nor in relation to the bloc to which it nevertheless belongs”. In fact, what it “is capable of is an unknown ... except that the notion of the interstice calls for the plural” (Pignarre & Stengers, 2011: 110-111).

3.1. Relearning to design with plural embodiments

Interstice already exists. I bet you’ve all seen it. The case studies and architectural projects we will be discussing today perhaps also happen in Interstice. I first came acquainted with Interstice in 2011 in Plaça de Catalunya. There I teamed up with members of what was then called the ‘commission of functional diversity’ of the indignados encampments.

In 2012, a peculiar activist design collective emerged out of it: *En torno a la silla* – a pun in Spanish to discuss how we wanted to situate around wheelchairs to change their surroundings, treating wheelchairs as agoras of a different city we wanted to pry open, until we couldn’t anymore. Because the Others of Infrastructure are not just nonhumans, but also many divergent humans whose bodies do not and wish not to comply to the standard pedestrian Infrastructure has been imagined for.

To learn to live in Interstice, we engaged in the strange diplomacy of plural embodiments, joining forces with initiatives attempting to remake urban arenas from a wide diversity of human bodies (Criado, 2019): organising co-creation workshops, public displays of low cost and DIY popular inventive, and public interventions of inaccessible spaces not by demanding that the experts of Infrastructure allowed us in, but breaking in without permission.

However hopeful this tale might sound, the problem of these two twin cities, is that they are twins, yes, but from a David Cronenberg film: where one has decided that only one can stand and needs to devour the other. Hence, the city of Interstice lives menaced by Infrastructure. In fact, Infrastructure closed the gates on our human version of Interstice in 2016, and I spent years wandering, searching for it. In the eight years I lived and worked in Germany, I tried summoning it many times working still as an anthropologist amongst designers.

In the course of those years, I became acquainted with the practice of many fellow designers interested in expanding the politics of ‘access’ to all life forms, as the first title of this seminar so beautifully put. I feel honoured today to be surrounded by many of you. As many of you surely know, to liberate Interstice and enable the possibility of something like an interspecies city we need many inventive approaches. From my part, I have come to believe that we will not be able to achieve any of this if we don’t put hegemonic ways of designing public space—the ones of Infrastructure—in crisis. Allow me to share with you a possible way to do so. I will draw on a radical teaching experiment that I taught with my colleagues Ignacio Farías and Felix Remter at the Faculty of Architecture of the Technical University of Munich in 2017 (Farías et al. 2023).

Amazed as we were at the advent of *Animal-Aided Design* in our department, with all those birds’ nests incorporated in facades or animal highways over human roads, we wanted our course to explore a different approach: rather than already know what animals need and design accordingly, we asked our students to start relearning their architectural practice from them. This required a several weeks-long multisensory retraining, after which we unveiled our puzzling brief: they were to help the beavers of Munich to put together a different entry to the ‘renaturalisation’ prize of the city’s Isar river. The Isar river had been thoroughly channelled through landmark modernist engineering at the turn of the 20th century.

Since the 1860s, beavers had been erased from this territory, but their reintroduction in the 1960s was far from peaceful. While hailed as ‘biodiversity experts,’ beavers often met by urban dwellers as ‘destructive’ nuisances for felling ornamentally placed trees or causing localized floods. The beaver was a problem to be managed with wire mesh and hard barriers. Faced with this conflict, our students’ first instinct was to design another ‘renaturalisation’ solution that would simply ensure peaceful co-existence—essentially trying to fix the problem for the beavers from a human perspective. When we later discussed collectively this as an anthropocentric gesture, the studio reached a moment of total breakdown.

This crisis brought forth a rather deep question: how can architects ever be authorized to design in the name of animals? Since beavers cannot articulate demands in the language of architects, students had to tackle this non-verbally. They had to invent an architectural contract enabling them to operate—not a legal one, but a material and bodily bond. They began to speculate by creating ‘suits-as-contracts.’ One was an ‘experience suit’ designed to help the architect sensory unlearning and relearning by simulating a beaver’s being in the world. Another was a ‘co-worker suit’ equipped with scent bottles and sound-amplifying tubes. These were conceived as tools for a strange urban diplomacy, of the *infraspecies* kind discussed by Anibal Arregui (2024): using odours to negotiate which trees not to cut, or amplifying water sounds to ‘ask’ beavers where they might want to intervene. But they also created a series of intricate protocols to feel authorised to act in the beavers’ name, subject to revision and permanent dispute: a pluriversal attitude to making (de la Cadena & Escobar, 2023), under a hospitable principle of no aggression.

Interestingly, if we contrast this with the frozen and paved legible landscapes of Infrastructure made for human control (Hutton, 2020; Duperrex, 2022), what we see is a different form of public space design. One partaking in the terraforming of the planet through fragile, tentative, collaborative and patchy materialisations of landscapes of coexistence. I reckon this was just a pedagogical experiment, but philosopher Baptiste Morizot and others have recently begun experimenting with similar real-life approaches in French rivers, as part of what they call the Movement in Alliance with the Beaver People for Living Rivers (*Mouvement d’Alliance avec le*

Peuple Castor pour des Rivières Vivantes):² a tensed web of interdependent and parasitic relations between humans and beavers, also not devoid of conflict (Morizot & Husky, 2024).

3.2. *In the shade: Regions of more-than-human coexistence*

In fact, there are currently many transdisciplinary collective speculations with diplomatic protocols and institutions searching to explore how to protect the habitability of the planet: e.g. the Parlement de Loire,³ the Ministry of Bees,⁴ the Embassy of the North Sea.⁵ Or, better put, the possibility for all the living to create environments. In those, habitability turns out to be a core value and principle that Baptiste Morizot and Laurent Neyret (2026) would even suggest elevating morally and legally to substitute that of human dignity: under the premise that total annihilation of the living web that gives us life also endanger ourselves, the human.

One of these collective experiments with urban habitability is The Department of Umbrology, which I have been co-curating since 2024:⁶ a speculative institution for the study and intervention of the life of urban shades (Criado, 2024b). In Barcelona, extreme heat is no longer a projection: it is a brutal reality redefining our communal life. As a compact, heavily engineered urban environment mostly terraformed as Infrastructure, Barcelona has become a laboratory for thermal regulation and technical solutionism. Yet, while institutional urbanism attempts to revitalize shade as a program to continue living in Infrastructure, we ask: what if shade enabled a radical relearning of how we inhabit our urban territories?

For two centuries, solar urbanism—rooted in 19th-century hygienist ideals—prioritized irradiation and air circulation. Approaching shade allows us to explore a different design imaginary: one where life on Earth is read as a long multispecies history of learning to protect ourselves from solar irradiation. The Department of Umbrology claims shade as a critical nature-cultural infrastructure with deep vernacular roots. In this view, acclimation is not a passive adaptation to a medium, but an embodied practice of habitability—made with our own hands—in a world subjected to anthropogenic heat. By recovering architectural, scientific, and artistic knowledges in and from the shadows, this project activates speculative prototypes where shadows serve as spaces for political inquiry (Criado & Boserman, 2026). We wish to explore a plural ‘right to shade’ that resonates with Édouard Glissant’s (1997) concept of opacity, defending the holobionts’ right to shelter against total exposure, an act of climatic sovereignty?

These ongoing investigations will culminate in an Itinerant Festival of Shadows in 2027, activating collective speculations to make living and non-living atmospheric care imaginable in the overheated urban landscapes of Infrastructure. What is the Department of Umbrology if not, again, yet another attempt at summoning Interstice: the plural city that learns to thrive not in the blinding light of Infrastructure, but in the protective, collaborative reach of the shade?

4. Concluding thoughts: Reactivating public space design?

To conclude, allow me to summarise. I have been attempting to provide a peculiar genealogy of notions of public space. Drawing from Engin Isin’s (2002) work charting out cities from their figurations of citizenship and alterity, I have sought to

² <https://mapca.eu/>

³ <https://polau.org/parlement-de-loire>

⁴ <http://www.apian.ch/>

⁵ <https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/>

⁶ <https://umbrology.org/>

update his typology to consider what I think are the two most pressing 'cities' at the core of *contemporary* public space. I have called the first one *Infrastructure*, and the second one *Interstice* (see Comparative Table).

To delineate the mode of being in *Infrastructure*—one that divides, spatializes, and segregates different bodies and beings according to notions of modernist governmentality—, I have discussed what this anthropological relationship with the world does when it encounters with soils, trees, rats, and dogs: offering a conditional inclusion subject to human welfare and hygiene. But *Infrastructure* is not a fully closed-down project. It also provokes 'feralities,' or non-designed effects of infrastructures, to say it with Anna Tsing et al. (2021). Some are extremely negative, as the modern project might have endangered the plural conditions of engendering habitability. Others could be carriers of a certain 'convivial' hope for urban holobionts (Førde et al., 2026) or, put differently, of an exploration of forms of living together under a principle of no aggression, even in cases where mutual coexistence might not be beneficial for two beings (Ávila, 2022).

I have called this feral and emergent city where this careful diplomacy of holobiont existence should be exerted *Interstice*. To make this 'lively city' (Barua, 2023) possible, palpable and actionable, I have tried to discuss some instantiations that I have witnessed and summoned repeatedly in the shade of *Infrastructure*. I believe *Interstice* to be an urban sensibility of the essence in this disastrous time of ours, where *Infrastructure* has begun to crack, breaking down the edifice of human exceptionalist welfare it sought to support.

To make *Interstice*, the city of all life forms, stronger our collective project should be to start dismantling *Infrastructure*'s dominion. In these fraught times, we need to protect the patchy and emergent spaces of *Interstice*, where collectives of living and non-living beings struggle to endure. We need to do so by liberating the environments that biotic communities are effortlessly trying to render habitable or 'terraform' otherwise. This begs for a new type of designer—a transdisciplinary and speculative one—and a different contract for public space—one centred around a diplomacy of protocols and institutions for habitability of holobionts—, to reactivate public space for it to become welcoming for all life forms.

Comparative Table

<i>City</i>	INFRASTRUCTURE	INTERSTICE
<i>Core value</i>	Welfare (Human-centric, dignity as a collateral and subsidiary value for other species, domesticated or wild)	Habitability (Life-centric, relational humanism: defending the possibility of life to create conditions of life)
<i>Mode of terraforming</i>	Mineralized, frozen legible landscapes; pavements as quintessential mode of control	Fragile, tentative, collaborative and patchy materialisations of (also technical) landscapes of coexistence
<i>Distribution of beings</i>	Nature / Culture (Nature below and above, technically subjugated and controlled by a surface over which Culture rises—infrastructure—and its purified relations)	Collectives of living & non-living beings (Constant compositions of attempted co-existence, hospitable explorations of non-mutual extermination of different beings, materialised in different ways)
<i>Model inhabitant</i>	The driver / The pedestrian (Hierarchy of worth for different bodies situated along a continuum of projects of technically-mediated inclusion: from special spaces for special bodies to a rather failed prospect of so-called 'universal' design)	Holobionts / Biotic communities (A tensed web of interdependent and parasitic relations, not devoid of conflict, but where total annihilation of others is endangering oneself; awaiting a pluriversal attitude to making, under a hospitable principle of no aggression)
<i>Institutional style</i>	Modern governmentality (welfare as technocratic rule with delegated representation; also incorporating in the last decades institutional attempts providing protection and conservation of other species, through different legal mechanisms and protocols)	Experimental & emergent (transdisciplinary collective speculations with diplomatic protocols and institutions for habitability: Parlement de Loire, Mouvement d'Alliance avec le Peuple Castor pour des rivières vivantes, Department of Umbrology, Ministry of Bees)
<i>Alterity</i>	The emergent biotic qualities of Interstice	The emplaced guarantees of Infrastructure

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