

URBAN ECOLOGIES

City Space, Material Agency, and
Environmental Politics in Contemporary Culture



CHRISTOPHER SCHLIEPHAKE

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Urban Ecologies

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Introduction

A Cultural Urban Ecology

In his landmark 1938 monograph study *The Culture of Cities*, the great writer and scholar Lewis Mumford undertook an examination of the city which conceptualized it as both a natural phenomenon as well as a cultural artifact:

The city is a fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel or an ant-heap. But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind. For space, no less than time, is artfully reorganized in cities: in boundary lines and silhouettes, in the fixing of horizontal planes and vertical peaks, in utilizing or denying the natural site, the city records the attitude of a culture and an epoch to the fundamental facts of its existence. The dome and the spire, the open avenue and the closed court, tell the story, not merely of different physical accommodations, but of essentially different conceptions of man's destiny. The city is both a physical utility for collective living and a symbol of those collective purposes and unanimities that arise under such favoring circumstance. With language itself, it remains man's greatest work of art. (Mumford 1970, 5)

For Mumford the city thus figures as both a spatial organization and physical presence, allowing social interaction and communal representation, and as a form of culture which is closely related to the imaginary and can itself be viewed as a "work of art." However, Mumford does not only refer to architectural forms, but rather invokes the "mind" as something which "takes form" in the city, which, in the reciprocal interplay between creation and perception, is "conditioned" by "urban forms." His ideas are exceptional both because they underline the imaginary and creative impulse which is implicitly present in social urban life, and because they resonate strongly with Greg-

ory Bateson's definition of ecology that he articulated in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* in 1972.

Bateson, rather cryptically, defined ecology as "the study of the interaction and survival of ideas and programs . . . in circuits" (Bateson 2000, 491), drawing an analogy to patterns of information processes and cybernetics. Central to his theory is a re-conceptualization of "mind" as an ecological process itself, as an, in the end, complex, dynamic and interrelated system of ideas that is itself embedded in and created through material forms and processes (Iovino 2012a, 62; Zapf 2008a, 149–50). As Gersdorf and Mayer put it in their discussion of Bateson's work, his "conceptual expansion" of ecology "into the realm of metaphor opened the door for a re-definition of mind as a principle that is 'immanent' to all structures and objects, be they natural or cultural. . . . More than simply the secularized version of an autonomous, metaphysical power that regulates all human affairs," they continue, "Bateson's 'mind' becomes a synonym for a cybernetic system, one in which individual body, society, and ecosystem interact and communicate with each other for the purpose of survival" (Gersdorf/Mayer 2006, 15). It is in this sense that Mumford's definition of "the city" above can itself be read as the description of such a "cybernetic system" of interrelated processes. Like Bateson, Mumford, too, conceptualizes the "mind" in a material way, as a principle shaped by the recurring interrelations and interpretations between an individual and his/her (urban built) environment. Although not explicitly stated in his own writing, Mumford's take on the city can therefore be interpreted as an ecological one; one which is not only concerned with the reciprocal interaction between city on the one hand and countryside on the other, or between the different life forms inhabiting an urban environment, but which seeks to frame it as a spatial-material as well as a cultural practice related to imagination and (cultural) self-expression.

This will also be the central idea of this study and the main definition of an urban ecology which seeks to view cities as spatial phenomena that have manifold and complex material interrelations with their respective natural environments, and that harbor "minds"—in the sense of Bateson—of their own: Ideas, imaginations, and interpretations that make up the cultural symbolic and discursive side of our urban lives and that are stored and constantly re-negotiated in their cultural and artistic representations.¹ I argue that an urban ecology which only takes into account the socio-spatial or material processes that frame urban life is incomplete, since manifestations of the cultural imagination have to be seen as integral parts of what we refer to as the "environment." I want to show that it is through the imagination that meaning is attached to urban space, that "urbanity" is, in the end, a state of "mind" rather than a geographic or material entity that can be clearly separated from, for instance, the "country." Although there is separation between "human-built" environments and "natural" environments that is apparent in

landscape features, I claim that material processes constitute a connecting link between the two spheres that puts into question whether we can indeed perceive them as separate entities. Materials like waste, toxics, or petroleum, easily traverse the boundaries between these different forms of environment and illustrate that their boundary is one of porosity and instability. As I want to make clear, urban life, rather than constituting a solely human-dominated domain, is conditioned by the interaction with nonhuman life forms and agents—interactions that are themselves subject to public debate and cultural imagination. Urban politics are concerned both with the spatial organization of urban environments and the management of material substances; aspects that are tackled in aesthetic representations of urban life which often (explicitly or implicitly) deal with the effects of these policies on community levels. Although, in other words, spatial-material processes constitute the framework of urban life, it is on the cultural-discursive level that their inner workings and interrelations are reflected and imbued with meaning. It is in and through culture that urbanity emerges as an ecological system. And it is here that new forms of dealing with the environment—in every sense of that complex term—can be sought.

The urban ecology outlined in this work, although interdisciplinary by nature, thus takes its main impetus from an analysis of examples taken from contemporary culture dealing with urban life and the complex interrelations between urban communities and their (natural and built) environments. As a “study of the mutually constructing relationship between culture and environment” (Bennett/Teague 1999, 5) it offers an ecocritical reading of our current urban world without raising a claim to be an all-encompassing analysis of the broadly layered and complex phenomenon of urbanity in general. Rather, the book seeks, on the one hand, to select specific examples which offer themselves as portrayals of the dense networks and dynamic interactions between urban societies, city spaces, and the larger environment—the, to borrow a term from David Abram (1997), “more-than-human world”—in which they are situated; on the other hand, it also tries to re-conceptualize the subject of urbanity within an ecocritical framework. For although ecocriticism has been defined, in the broadest sense, as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 1996, xvii)² and has evolved into a burgeoning field of literary and cultural studies, urbanity has, to a large extent, been missing from its main subject matters or was treated only marginally in its theoretical underpinnings. This study aims to address this gap both in practice as well as in theory and to reclaim our urban world for an environmentalist agenda in which the urban environment is viewed as an integral part of the densely related ecological systems of this planet.

However, it would, of course, be wrong to suggest that urbanity has been an anathema in ecocriticism. As Murphy reminds us, ecocriticism “should

not be misconstrued as a singular theory but rather as a movement with common concerns among its participants,” who “diverge wildly and widely on which theories and texts ought to be included or be made the focus of attention” (Murphy 2009, 4). Michael Bennett and David W. Teague have, for instance, been among the first to discover the topic of urbanity for ecocritical readings of environmental texts³ which had thus far been “associated with a body of work devoted to nature writing, American pastoralism, and literary ecology” (Bennett/Teague 1999, 5). Their edited volume *In the Nature of Cities* had the twofold aim to “sharpen this focus on the nature of cities by exploring the components of an urban ecocriticism” by pointing “to the self-limiting conceptualizations of nature, culture, and environment built into many ecocritical projects by their exclusion of urban places” and to “remind city dwellers of our placement within ecosystems and the importance of this fact for understanding urban life and culture” (6). While the collected essays certainly managed to offer various examples of an analysis of how the environmental imagination is also at home in the darkened side alleys of a ghetto or the shimmering concrete of a downtown business district, they were, for the most part, under-theorized when it came to the question of how an urban environment relates to its wider surroundings and in how far it could be viewed as an ecosystem itself.

Starting from Newman’s observation that “the environmental crisis threatens all landscapes—wild, rural, suburban, and urban” and that “South Boston is just as natural (and wild) as Walden Pond” (Newman 1998, 71), Lawrence Buell’s spell-binding study *Writing for an Endangered World* aspires to put these interrelations into focus, to “put ‘green’ and ‘brown’ landscapes, the landscapes of exurbia and industrialization, in conversation with one another” (Buell 2001, 7).⁴ For “although,” as Buell remarks with regard to ecocritical readings, “their reach extends to any literary transaction between human imagination and material world, in practice they have concentrated . . . on ‘natural’ environment rather than environment more inclusively” (8). Buell thus calls for a shift of attention to “the interdependence between urban and outback landscape, and the traditions of imagining them” (8) in order to examine the “indispensableness of physical environment as a shaping force in human art and experience, and how such an aesthetic works” (9). It is especially the latter aspect that serves as a recurring concern of this study as well, focusing on the way in which cultural imagination and representation are shaped by and interact with contemporary urbanity, whereby the urban environment will be treated as a “built environment . . . created by human activity” (Kemp 2004, 22).⁵ However, the urban environment will not be conceptualized as a static entity, but rather as an ever-shifting, dynamic space in which many, to borrow a term from Latour, “actants”⁶ reside and function as mediators between human communities, city space, and the “more-than-human” or more-than-urban world. For the urban environmental

imagination is, as will be argued, determined by the “physical environment” as well as by the fleeting, mutating bodies and material substances that move through it.

William Cronon, in his great 1992 study *Nature's Metropolis*, was one of the first to explore these material interactions, the “material ties,” from an environmental historical point of view “between city and country in an effort to understand the city's place in nature” (Cronon 1991, 8). His study did not only uncover the flow of materials, substances, and commodities between the urban and rural landscape, showing how they depend on one another, but led to a questioning of the very categories by which we differentiate between city on the one hand and nature on the other. Writing about his early contempt for city life in Chicago and the admiration of Wisconsin's agricultural countryside, he remarks:

I began to doubt the ‘naturalness’ of the wall that seemed to stand so solidly between the country I thought I loved and the city I thought I hated. If that wall was more a habit of thought than a fact of nature, then decrying the ‘unnaturalness’ of city life in a place like Chicago was merely one way of doing what my own environmental ethic told me to oppose: isolating human life from the ecosystems that sustain it. Putting the city outside nature meant sending humanity into the same exile. And yet this is precisely what I and many other modern environmentalists have unconsciously often done. . . . The boundary between natural and unnatural shades almost imperceptibly into the boundary between nonhuman and human, with wilderness and the city lying at opposite poles—the one pristine and unfallen, the other corrupt and unredeemed. Gauged by how we feel about them, the distance we travel between city and country is measured more in the mind than on the ground. (8)

Cronon's insights are vital to an urban ecology not only because he invites us to re-consider the city's place in nature, but because his thoughtful analysis helps to uncover the artificial dichotomy between urban and non-urban landscapes, or, to be more exact, one that equates them with an unnatural and a natural one. These ideas are central, because they counteract one fateful fallacy in Western thought that has been prevalent since the early modern age, namely to uphold a rigid division between culture and nature, city and countryside;⁷ and because they make clear that by excluding a human-dominated ecosystem like the city from our perception of the ‘natural’ world we will indeed only reach a very limited understanding of the complex patterns and interacting processes that shape our environments. Cronon's work can thus be perceived as a deeply ethical project, one that re-introduces urbanity as an ecosystem in its own right that interrelates with the wider ecosystems of the “more-than-human” world.

For millennia, humans have organized themselves in cities as their primary way of living. From here, they have significantly altered their natural

environments and have made decisions that have severely affected habitats of other species, natural resources, and the flow of substances in the wider atmosphere—all in ways, that had, in turn, effects on the living conditions in cities and the ways communities choose to live together. By focusing on these issues, an urban ecology, as it is aspired in this work, is therefore primarily an ecological ethics (Clark 2011, 152; Zapf 2008b; Robbins/Hintz/Moore 2010, 70–77), one that explores the inner-workings of human-dominated ecosystems and investigates their shortcomings in order to point out ways to make cities more sustainable, especially by illustrating to environmentalists and city-dwellers alike that cities are integral parts of our natural environments. In this context, it is remarkable that Cronon, too, invokes the “mind” as the central place from which we perceive our respective environments and interpret them, including the often arbitrary differentiation between city and country, culture and nature. Drawing on Bateson once again, an urban ecology is thus also faced with the necessity of creating a new “image” of the city (Bateson 2000, 416)—one that does not negate the different environments and transitions between it, but that breaks down rigid oppositions that “transform” the city into some strange other, an ugly concrete stain on an otherwise beautiful landscape. The city, too, is a form of nature.

In his 1996 monograph study *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, the Marxist geographer David Harvey has also, echoing Cronon, called for the need to integrate urbanity into ecological thinking by famously stating that “there is nothing unnatural about New York City.” He argues that “it is inconsistent to hold that everything in the world relates to everything else, as ecologists tend to do, and then decide that the built environment and the urban structures that go into it are somehow outside of both theoretical and practical consideration.” He finally claims that “the effect has been to evade integrating understandings of the urbanizing process into environmental-ecological analysis” (Harvey 1996, 186). In the same vein, Roger Keil has warned ecologists that “it would be false to indulge in a naive conceptualization of nature as something outside of human society and human practice. Nature is not something ‘green’ outside the city and ecology does not just deal with wild things” (Keil 1995, 282). Both Harvey’s Marxist geography and Keil’s “Urban Political Ecology”⁸ have repeatedly stressed the need to re-conceptualize the city as a human dominated spatial arena which is socially produced and “where the global ecological crisis manifests itself concretely” (282). They thus re-enforce the need to review ecology as a practice—a practice famously coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866 as “the study of organisms in relation to each other and to the surroundings in which they live” (Clark 2011, 152). The implicit argument in their writings is that an ecology as a science is incomplete as long as it is reduced to the biological investigation of “the relationship between biological bodies or organisms and their animate and inanimate environments” (Gersdorf/Mayer 2006, 15), especially

as long as it excludes human-dominated urban ecosystems and their impact on the “more-than-human” world. Accordingly, an “urban ecology” calls for the need to, on the one hand, broaden ecology’s outlook by integrating built environments and human communities into its theoretical frameworks, and, on the other, to integrate the natural environment, environmental processes, and material substances into (urban) geography in order to avoid an anthropocentric perspective that is narrowly focused on “the human dimensions of the city” (Hall 2006, 152).

While this study is understood as a contribution to this project, it does not purport to be an example of an urban ecology as a science. Rather, in its focus on the analysis of cultural representations of contemporary urbanity, it uses the term in a metaphorical sense,⁹ as a way to uncover the deep-seated and far-reaching interrelatedness and interactions between urban systems and their communities and the wider environments in which they are situated, focusing on spatial parameters (i.e., the interplay between natural and built environment in an urban setting), material processes (i.e., the urban metabolisms and flows of material substances that stem from man’s exchanges with the “more-than-human” world), and environmental politics (i.e., decisions of urban governments and communities that continue to shape the urban environments with far-reaching consequences for the global ecosystem). It will be argued that cultural media function as forms of self-representation and self-reflection (Iser 1993) that stage these complex interconnections in ways that are analogous to ecological principles not only in how they render how space, materiality, politics, and cultural imagination relate to one another, but also in how they can be viewed as active agents in these processes as well. Thus, “culture” will be understood, with Peter Finke, “as an ecosystemically organized product of overall evolutionary processes” (Finke 2006, 175), as a means of portraying our urban worlds and of envisioning “potential” (208) alternatives or futures for them. Consequently, this study offers cultural ecological readings of different cultural texts, films, and television documentaries and series that put cities center stage and offer explorations into the nature of cities, reflecting on their inner-workings and the manifold interrelations with environmental problems and ecological processes of the global ecosystem. Thereby, cultural ecology will be understood in the sense of Hubert Zapf, as a way “to focus on the interaction . . . of culture and nature without neglecting the inescapable linguistic and discursive mediatedness of that interrelationship” (Zapf 2006, 51). Within this framework of a cultural ecology, imaginative literary texts and cultural forms of creative self-expressions do not only “stage and explore, in ever new scenarios, the relationship of prevailing cultural systems to the needs and manifestations of human and nonhuman ‘nature’” (54), but also reflect on deficits and alternative models of that reciprocal relationship.¹⁰ In this sense, the cultural products explored in this book will be analyzed as media that, on

the one hand, give a critical account of various aspects of our contemporary urban world, and that can, on the other, “transform” (Bateson 2000, 418) our ideas and images of cities by re-imagining their place in nature and showing how they are integral parts of ecological processes that manifest themselves not only locally, but globally.

Since this project is thus a highly inter- or transdisciplinary one, the remainder of this introduction is meant to give an overview of the different theoretical implications of what one could call a cultural urban ecology. As a starting point, the term “urban ecology,” which has come to mean different things in different disciplines (Waage 2009), will be further explored, in order to illustrate aspects that a literary and cultural analysis can import from other theories and to underline how it can contribute to the analysis of our contemporary cities. In this context, three aspects will prove of vital importance: Firstly, an examination of city space as the arena where the urban built environment functions as the frame for social and ecological interactions; and of the representation of spatial dimensions in cultural media and texts, which can transform abstract space into “storied place” or contest hegemonic readings of it. Secondly, the implications of ecocritical conceptions of material agency which will help to re-figure cities as spaces of transit and transfer, where human bodies, material substances, and the built environment interact and merge in manifold ways, questioning whether cities can indeed be conceptualized as human-dominated ecosystems. And thirdly, an exploration of environmental politics as the policy-centered domain of urban life, where politicians, social interest groups, and urban communities are involved to discursively negotiate and decide on issues that have a vital influence on the questions of environmental impact, justice, and the sustainability of cities. Finally, a short overview of the cultural texts and media explored in this book will be given, also highlighting the imaginary quality of cities and urban discourse.

URBAN ECOLOGY

The term “urban ecology” has a wide variety of meanings and is used by a plethora of disciplines, including social scientists, natural scientists, and urban planners (McDonnell 2011, 9). It was first coined by the Chicago School of urban sociology in the 1920s, most prominently by Robert E. Park, R. D. McKenzie, and Robert Burgess, who drew analogies between the organization and spatial formation of cities to biological processes of plant and animal life, in fact perceiving the city as a “plantlike organism” (Bridge/Watson 2000, 14).¹¹ However, their aim was not, as Alberti notes, “to study ecological relationships but to understand urban systems, building on ecological analogies” (Alberti 2008, 9). Drawing on concepts originally developed in

ecology, one of their primarily influential approaches was “conceptually linking urban spaces to distinctive social groups, creating a spatiality to the urban form and to cultural difference that was previously undeveloped” (Warren/Harlan/Boone/Lerman/Shochat/Kinzig 2010, 175). Thereby, the Chicago School also became a driving force behind the evolution of “human ecology.” McKenzie defined the term “as a study of the spatial and temporal relations of human beings as affected by the selective, distributive, and accommodative forces of the environment” (McKenzie 1984, 63–64), especially focusing on the “spatial relations” between individuals, social groups, and their institutions (64). As Andrew Ross points out, the conceptualization “of city space as an evolving, contested habitat” proved to be influential for urban studies and the “description of collective adaption to a given environment became a favored model for explaining the organization of urban space” (Ross 1999, 17).¹² In so far as the city is understood as a spatially organized environment, the approach of the Chicago School will also be an important influence for this study, while the overtly formulaic and economic models, especially of Burgess (Pacione 2009, 139–42), will not be included; rather, space will be re-figured not solely as a contested social arena (although this is certainly an important aspect), but as a vital inter-actant for community life, namely as habitat and a grounding framework for the development of a sense of place and identity. The latter aspect is, in fact, implicitly present in the Chicago School’s writings as well, notably in Park’s:

The city . . . is something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences, streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc.; something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions. . . . The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature. (Park 1984, 1)

In this context, it is significant that Park, too, like Mumford and Cronon, invokes the “mind” and its intricate connection to urban life and space, underlining the cultural processes by which space is, in a reciprocal way, perceived, inhabited, and transformed.¹³ The city as an integral part of the “vital processes of the people who compose it” will therefore serve as a guiding idea of this book as well, while the analysis of cultural media will explore how abstract space is interpreted, narrated, and, finally, negotiated by turning it into a “storied place” and how they can function as counter discourses against views that frame urban space merely in economic terms as something to be administered, planned, and rationalized. I would argue that