



# Anthropological and interdisciplinary perspectives on the Living City

Perig Pitrou

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# Ré-imaginer des architectures en prenant soin des milieux habités

European  
C17A Villes vivantes 2

# **Ré-imaginer des architectures en prenant soin des milieux habités**

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For millennia, human societies have developed knowledge, know-how and symbols that have helped them to alter natural environments by building a great diversity of cultural worlds. The means employed to act on the living world – agriculture, livestock breeding, horticulture, apiculture, etc. – and the structures – houses, tracks, roads, transport and storage facilities – contribute to this way of inhabiting the world. As well as biodiversity, the diversity of technologies and social organisations developed to maintain the coexistence between living creatures, both human and nonhuman, constitutes a treasury of experiences from which to draw ideas about rethinking our relationship to the environment. The contemporary era has shown that the power to alter nature generated by human inventiveness is best directed when accompanied by reflection on how to coexist harmoniously with a multiplicity of organisms and ecosystems.

Within this framework, the “Anthropology of Life” provides instruments for exploring the different scales of interweaving between technical processes and life processes,<sup>1</sup> and for imagining the city of tomorrow. This very dynamic field focuses on the diversity of the conceptions of life developed by human societies, and how they reflect the sociotechnical conditions that structure their interactions with the living world. Everywhere on the planet, humans can observe, in their own bodies and in nature, life processes such as procreation, birth, growth, regeneration and ageing, which depend on a power that they are aware that they do not fully control. This is apparent in the effort, encountered in all societies, to discover the causes of these phenomena, by forging “theories of life”, and to develop technologies and institutions designed to maintain the best conditions for collective existence in a given environment.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary questions about urbanism and architecture associated with the theme of the “living city” gain from being tackled from this anthropological perspective within the context of an interdisciplinary dialogue that asserts the value of empirical studies when it comes to describing different levels of interaction between forms of social organisation and dynamics specific to biological and ecological systems. How does knowledge of the living world, and of life, influence the design of cities and of ways of inhabiting? How can technological innovations help to coordinate human projects with the agency specific to living systems, notably in order to take into account the random dimension of evolving processes? How do human institutions, which gives stability to rules and values (in the economic, moral, legal, religious, aesthetic domains) in sociopolitical organisations, maintain coexistence between living beings, human and nonhuman, and between the different forms of life experienced by human beings according to their age, gender and culture? Answering these questions requires the use of methods that are capable of framing biological and social dynamics within a broader structure, in order to elucidate ways of constructing and inhabiting an urban environment.

This kind of approach is a departure from discourses that assert – and sell – the supposed capacity of biomimetics to provide solutions to the ecological crisis. Stereotypical arguments encouraging human beings to imitate or take inspiration from nature are thriving. They generally draw on a reductive vision of the living world, viewed through superficial appearances rather than as a complex phenomenon whose mechanisms are inaccessible to immediate human perception. While some environmental disasters result from the tendency of Western industrial societies to imagine human beings as “masters and



possessors” of nature, as Descartes put it, the biomimetic creed views nature as an engineer or teacher to be followed in order to avoid mistakes. This reversal of the relations with nature scarcely differs from the initial dualism: it even conveys a conception close to the creationist view, suggesting that life is directed towards the purpose of finding technical solutions to the relations between organisms and their environments.<sup>3</sup> Rather than a description of reality, this interpretation in fact reflects the technical character of the human perception of nature. Instead of seeking to observe nature for purposes of imitation, the goal of anthropology is to understand what, in concrete terms, human beings do when they undertake projects in which organisms and ecosystems are used as models. Rather than one-way technical operations, imitation or inspiration are processes that achieve complexity through methods borrowed from the anthropology of technology.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of *Beyond Nature and Culture*,<sup>5</sup> the comparative approach adopted with Lauren Kamili and Fabien Provost in the issue of *Techniques & Culture* dedicated to *Biomimetics*, further highlights cultural variations in ways of imitating nature.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than claiming to have found solutions, thinking about life – understood as an evolving phenomenon that randomly gives rise to a large variety of living creatures – calls for a more exploratory approach, one that takes the time for interdisciplinary examination. This was our mindset when we found it the “La vie à l’œuvre” (Life at Work) collective, with representatives from the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, and from the art world, in order to think about the problems raised by contemporary biotechnologies and about the definition of life.<sup>7</sup> In a contribution on New intelligences to the journal *Stream*, published by Agence PCA-Stream, we explain this approach by drawing analogies between the way life produces different levels of organisation and the way that we have gradually developed a collective intelligence, as if a process of coalescence had gradually led to the emergence, in us and with us, of a living entity composed of multiple experiences.<sup>8</sup> The power of our collective lies paradoxically in the recognition of the fact that our different points of view can only be partial. Without being a model, this form of collaboration seems relevant in tackling the problems raised by the relations between the living world and the city.

This approach is applied practically in a prospective exercise initiated by the architecture firm TVK, by AREP and by BNP Paribas Real Estate, around a project to renovate the former Rapée Station site, located at the heart of the Charenton-Bercy ZAC (urban development zone, Paris, 12<sup>th</sup> arrondissement). Looking at ways to transform this historic site into a “City of the Living”, these firms asked our group to cast light on the connections between an environment in which several living species coexist and the construction of infrastructures and apartment buildings. Our text, entitled “In the Workshop of Life”, part of a working document, does not immediately reach conclusions regarding the renovation of the station site. Instead, it draws on an interdisciplinary methodology to identify possible pathways and to initiate a dialogue between multiple stakeholders (inhabitants, scientists, public and private partners, civil society organisations, artists) on quality of life in Paris. Rather than seeking to achieve a utopian outcome, we suggest taking advantage of the biological, ecological and social realities operating in an ensemble characterised by the interweaving of human infrastructures and constantly evolving networks of life. Our scientific aim is to

indicate how principles of action can draw on a quantitative inventory of the constraints – material, energy-related, ecological, etc. – that have to be accommodated. It takes into account the social, technological and anthropological dimensions in play when human beings cohabit with animals, plants, fungi and microorganisms, never forgetting that human beings are also part of the living world.

In practical terms, this work is based on site visits conducted in order to identify the nature of the realities (biological, architectural, geological, social, historic, etc.) and in order to explore, through interdisciplinary surveys, the forms of interaction between life processes and technical processes. In workshops and shared writing sessions, the aim of group discussion is to identify the problems, the interface between the vital and the social, in order to devise new ways of designing construction projects. To simplify somewhat, our argument is formed around five keywords: Networks, Dynamics, Evolutions, Cycles, Worlds. These keywords are used as heuristic devices, “indicators” – to borrow a term from Durkheim – that help us to focus on and explore the interactions between biosocial dynamics and conceptions of the city. The challenge is to avoid using these general categories as metaphors that indiscriminately equate human agency to the agency of nonhuman creatures, as does Anna Tsing in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*,<sup>9</sup> when she ascribes to mushrooms the capacity to have “plans” or to be “worldmakers”.

Interdisciplinary research along the same lines is being developed at PSL University within the “Living City” research group, exploring the notion of the “Metabolic City”, initiated in partnership with the PCA-Stream agency. In March 2023, during a training week on *Living Cities: designing, building and inhabiting the urban worlds of the future*, students followed a course of interdisciplinary study combined with site visits in order to learn how to identify “indicators of the living world” in urban space.

Since Abel Wolman’s seminal article on the “metabolism of cities”, it has become common to find books that envisage the city *as a metabolism* in which the circulation of flows such as food, energy, water, etc. is modelled quantitatively.<sup>10</sup> In this view, the fact that cities the world over are experiencing degrowth is significant.<sup>11</sup> These now shrinking urban spaces used to work well, growing in some cases over very long periods, and increasing the wealth of their inhabitants. Territorial shrinkage is a process that is neither simple nor unique. It affects these spaces in their social, spatial, economic and environmental dimensions, and is symptomatic of the advent of a new urban regime, in which the growth of cities is no longer as certain as was imagined during a period when urban growth was the rule.<sup>12</sup> The overview provided in the *Handbook on Shrinking Cities* sets out possibilities for interdisciplinary approaches to biosocial phenomena:<sup>13</sup> to what extent do these spaces offer possibilities for new forms of revitalisation and what are the potential options? What types of approaches to planning are needed to tackle the specific realities of these shrinking spaces? Will shrinking cities be the new spaces of creativity to become or remain “living cities”?

The term “metabolic city” also refers to the *coexistence of metabolisms* in urban space, which leads into research that focuses on the relations between human and nonhuman organisms. This implies the need for more qualitative observations of practices. Walking is a good example. The work done by the Unit for Biocultural Variation and Obesity, headed by Stanley Ulijaszek at Oxford University, on the links between diet, physical activity and urbanism, suggests that this practice should be treated as one of the factors



to be taken into account when modelling lifestyles in a built environment.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, walking can be considered as a phenomenological means of observing urban reality.<sup>15</sup> Walking, strolling through an area without being restricted by mobility infrastructures, is a way to explore the living world, climate, margins, boundaries, invisible or dysfunctional spaces, apparently valueless or sometimes disturbing places. Apart from its spontaneity and its ordinariness, walking is a means of learning and an art of observation that makes us experience interdependency relations and interscalar relations both physically and cognitively.

Considering the living city through the prism of metabolism thus requires the development of integrated approaches that combine quantitative objectivation and phenomenological experience in order to better measure the nature of the coexistence between infrastructures and both human and nonhuman organisms, and the connection between human plans and the random aspects associated with the development of technical systems and living systems. Books like *Natura urbana* by Matthew Gandy or *Lively Cities* by Maan Barua, researchers at Cambridge University's Department of Geography, provide a good illustration of investigations that are attentive to the diversity of the manifestations of the living world in cities.<sup>16</sup>

For the anthropology of life, as well as for interdisciplinary investigations, research programmes on the living city cannot be content with establishing analogies between organisms and urban phenomena, nor can they imagine that observing natural environments will bring design solutions for the city of tomorrow. It is the specificity and the complexity of these phenomena, at the interface between nature and society, which needs to be explored with interdisciplinary forms of investigation, for which the goals and the methodologies largely remain to be devised.

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- 2 Perig Pitrou, *Les anthropologues et la vie*, Mimésis Éditions, 2022.
- 3 Perig Pitrou, Lauren Kamili & Fabien Provost, "Techniques et Natures. Pour une approche anthropologique des biomimétismes", *Techniques & Culture* 73, pp. 20-33.
- 4 Fabien Provost, Lauren Kamili & Perig Pitrou "Enquête sur l'imitation du vivant. Remarques méthodologiques", *Techniques & Culture* 73, pp. 208-221.
- 5 Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, 2005.
- 6 Lauren Kamili, Perig Pitrou & Fabien Provost, "Biomimétismes. Imitation des êtres vivants et modélisation de la vie", *Techniques & Culture*, 73.
- 7 The activities of the interdisciplinary group "La vie à l'œuvre" are presented on this website: <https://lifeinthemaking.net/fr/>
- 8 Collectif La vie à l'œuvre, "L'intelligence collective à l'œuvre", *Stream*, 5, pp. 467-487.
- 9 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the possibility of life in the capitalist ruins*, Princeton University Press, 2015.
- 10 Abel Wolman, "The metabolism of cities", *Scientific American*, 213, 3, 1965, pp. 178-193. See also Sabine Barles, "Le métabolisme urbain et la question écologique", *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, Vol. 92, 1, pp. 2002.

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- 14 Stanley Ulijaszek, “Physical activity and the human body in the (increasingly smart) built environment”, *Obesity reviews*, 19, 2018, pp. 84-93.
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