

Opening the city: Reorienting the built environment towards exposure, vulnerability and presence

Taylor Hood

Taylor is a Scottish naturalist and writer who holds degrees in literature and wildlife ecology. His research advocates for ruptures in the normal functioning of our self-centred society, seeking to reopen a world that has become insulated against non-human claims. He is an Associate Editor of *The Ecological Citizen*.

This article examines how the contemporary built environment diminishes the possibility of presence by minimizing exposure and vulnerability. By drawing on the work of Byung-Chul Han and Patrick Curry, the paper provides an interpretative account of how cities are constructed to enclose the human figure in a world that is increasingly separate from the more-than-human realm, and then clarifies how urban change itself is to be understood once enclosure is recognized as an imperative of the built environment. It argues that many well-intentioned efforts to improve cities ecologically can produce real alterations while leaving intact the deeper organization through which everyday experience is structured. Rather than proposing policy measures or design solutions, the paper offers a way of reading urban change that attends to the distinction between effects that human-centred cities can absorb and conditions that would have to endure as an ordinary part of their texture.

Keywords: ecological living; environmental humanities; societal change; values; visions

Citation: Hood T (2026) Opening the city: Reorienting the built environment towards exposure, vulnerability and presence. *The Ecological Citizen* 9(2): 152–60.

To live ecologically is to allow oneself to be touched – even disrupted – by the many nonhuman agencies that surround us. Yet in our major towns and cities, we rarely feel their influence. This makes urban centres important sites for investigating how contact with the more-than-human world is both restricted and mediated.

The city as enclosure

Modern cities organize urban life through their mass, surfaces, organization of movement and proliferation of signals. Crucially, these aspects cannot be

cleanly distinguished; together, they enclose human life in ways that separate it from the more-than-human world. The result is a felt sense of being sealed off from the wild and beautiful Earth, even where nature is present.

Enclosure is easiest to recognize in the physical order of major urban conurbations. In such places, tall, monolithic buildings predominate, blocking views of the sky and severing continuity with the surrounding land. Repeated across cities, their scale and uniformity render urban form progressively standardized. With respect to these buildings' surfaces, glass and polished metal reflect traffic, signage and human activity back upon itself, enclosing perception within a self-referential urban field. At ground level, expansive concrete pavements and roads harden and flatten the city. Streets and crossings form a repeating grid that encourages endless movement, funnelling bodies and vehicles along set lines, while ranks of streetlights prolong this activity into the night – dimming the stars above. And within this heavily engineered landscape, space for nonhuman beings is sharply restricted. Where nonhuman life is not eliminated within the enclosure, it is often treated as a managed remainder and confined to bounded pockets, such as parks, roadside plantings, the gaps and edges of the city.

These spatial and material arrangements cannot be understood adequately as neutral solutions to urban problems. Rather, they reflect a way of regimenting the city – and the world it sits within – around the coordination of human goals. Recent ecological critiques describe this situation as one of planetary humanization, whereby buildings, transport infrastructures, industrial and material systems, and communication networks increasingly dominate the Earth's surface, outweighing nonhuman biomass and reconfiguring landscapes at every scale (Gray and Crist, 2024). Enclosure, from this perspective, does not depend on cities being spatially compact or physically contained, since urban sprawl can intensify enclosure insofar as expansion extends these same patterns of domination outward, subordinating nonhuman life to human coordination. Curry (2019) describes this mode of ordering as Apollonian hyper-control, a bid for detached, calculative mastery. In Curry's account, which develops from that of Mumford (1967), such hyper-control is structurally embedded in the Megamachine – the vast anti-ecological system that marshals labour, technology and governance towards efficiency. The engine of capital drives standardization and exploitation; technoscience supplies the technical means; and the state consolidates control through regulation and planning. I suggest that these interlocking arms do not operate automatically but rely upon constant, often unseen maintenance to sustain the system's apparent stability.

The coordination and resulting structural enclosure just described is most pronounced in Global North centres such as London or New York, which most closely approximate an aspirational form of urbanism. Many cities in the Global South, such as Lagos and New Delhi, fail to instantiate the above dynamics in the same systematic way, often marked by uneven development and infrastructural strain although others – notably Dubai – pursue and reproduce many of the same spatial and material configurations as those of the North. Yet these

tendencies are not perfectly realized even within the North, since development and coordination are always partial and incomplete. The argument here therefore concerns an organizing orientation, independent of location.

The way cities are organized dictates how they are felt in daily experience. Following Curry (2013), place gives way to space as the sensuous particularity of lived localities is overridden by universalizing abstractions, causing sites to become interchangeable and thin in character. What is lost in this displacement is not merely familiarity, but the qualitative depth through which a place can found meaning and facilitate relation. A place, in this stronger sense, is a situated world not assembled entirely around the self but one in which the human figure remains answerable to something beyond itself. According to Han, processes of globalization in particular intensify this displacement by producing environments marked by a disorienting sameness and sterility, enacting what he calls a “de-siting violence” (2021: 71) that makes dwelling difficult. The term ‘dwelling’ here refers to the capacity to remain with a place over time in ways that allow resistance and interruption to register. When such dwelling is undermined, the likelihood of exposure to otherness recedes. Han’s formulation is decisive: “The *experience of presence* requires *exposure, vulnerability*” (2022: 57). Under the sway of the Megamachine, however, exposure and vulnerability are minimized because they represent obstacles to unimpeded mastery.

At the level of lived perception, the Megamachine’s ordering of urban life is experienced phenomenologically through smoothness and transparency. Within the sphere of aesthetics, Han (2015) takes aim at the elimination of roughness and resistance due to society’s fixation on sleek and polished forms, which is evident both in our buildings and technologies. In broader terms, smoothness describes the drive to accelerate circulation – of capital and communication – by structuring environments so that movement, interpretation and response are anticipated and streamlined. This experiential smoothing is inseparable from an ideal of transparency (Han, 2021; 2022). When pathologized, the ideology of transparency creates the expectation that nothing should remain opaque or withdrawn. What cannot be quickly understood or navigated comes to appear dysfunctional or suspect. Yet ecological connection in particular depends on mystery; paradoxically, it is opacity that makes openness – and connection to what is different – possible. Rather than standing in a causal relation, then, smoothness and transparency operate as complementary logics, since smoothness orchestrates experience so as to minimize interruption, while transparency enforces a demand for immediate availability and access. Jointly, they describe the experiential conditions through which enclosure is normalized.

The smooth – even agreeable – character of our existence, coupled with our claim to access, protects us from opposing forces. Han (2021; 2022) argues that, through neoliberal capitalist society’s insistence on constant affirmation and compulsory self-optimization we have lost touch with negativity, which refers not only to challenging emotions but also to the deeper capacity of something to resist assimilation through the introduction of limits, friction

and otherness. In the context of the contemporary built environment oriented around smoothness and transparency, this capacity is either destroyed or, where elimination is impractical, pre-emptively softened. Disturbance is registered only fleetingly, as an anomaly, rather than allowed to reshape ordinary experience. When negativity is no longer deflected in this way but endured, a break in smoothness becomes felt. Han (2015) gestures towards such moments through the evocative figurative image of the *wound*, but he has not developed it systematically and discusses it, in part, through aesthetic reflection. The wound matters here because it identifies the exposure that follows this break, in which resistance is lived as vulnerability and presence comes forth. “Without a *wound*,” Han writes, “I ultimately hear only the echo of myself. A *wound* is an opening, an *ear for the other*” (2022: 57). In a sealed environment, such moments of attunement may be occasioned by slight encounters: a narrow gap between two towers suddenly revealing the sky, or a bird’s call briefly carrying above the cacophony of traffic. Understood in this way, the wound becomes generative. Rather than a celebration of damage or suffering, it constitutes a breach in the self’s shield and in systemic enclosure, through which the world may reappear.

The wound, I suggest, is part of the enabling ground through which wonder may arise, since it brings forth an initial sense of presence via exposure, without determining how that exposure will be received (for a broader discussion, see Hood, 2025). In its unfolding, the emergence of wonder may feel entangled with this opening or even appear to precede it. As Curry (2019; 2021) insists, wonder – the heart of enchantment – is a spiritual–material experience arising relationally in encounters with an enchanting other, in which the other’s inherent qualities, such as beauty, mystery or agency, are apprehended without reduction to human utility. Enchantment, at its fullest, entails nothing more than “sheer presence” (Curry, 2019: 81). Such a deeply felt sense of presence cannot be generalized, repeated at will or secured in advance, which is precisely why regimes of calculability and control must suppress them. These regimes operate by making the world manageable and predictable, a process of disenchantment in which beings come to appear primarily as resources rather than as agencies to be encountered (Weber, 1946; Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; Curry, 2017). By its very nature, then, wonder signifies a meeting with another that cannot be simulated or substituted without being lost.

Within urban spaces, this relational mode is frequently distorted via the management of attention, a more subtle means of enclosure than the sheer material structuring of buildings and grids. In contrast with wonder, Curry (2019) conceptualizes glamour – perpetuated by the Megamachine – as an artificial simulation that functions as a pervasive distraction in modern society. Glamour distorts the natural need for connection by channelling Dionysian unity – the extreme merging in which difference is obliterated – into managed, consumable ends, producing intense experiences that seemingly satisfy longing without enabling genuine ecological relation and risk. The work of glamour is most evident in the saturation of urban spaces by advertisements, which offer a

veneer of openness within a sealed environment, demanding and commanding our attention. More generally, the preponderance of screens, signs, notifications and shifting images in cities produces an overload of information. Han (2022) argues that this perpetual flood of information fails to confer durability, which only arises from sustained dwelling in places and from contact with stable physical things that resist our immediate grasp. In cities, attention is kept in motion, eroding the stillness in which relational rupture might take hold.

As argued above, enclosure in cities is maintained both physically and perceptually. In pursuit of synthesis, it is worth examining a single paradigmatic scene of enclosure. Figure 1 shows a street outside an Apple shopfront, a space of humanization that, being extremely ordered, manifests hyper-control. The wide walkway – devoid of vegetation or soil – signals a fixation on aesthetic smoothness and, more broadly, enacts the city's logic of frictionless exchange. This walkway abuts an enormous glass façade, through which the inside of the shop can be seen under too-bright lights, exhibiting the queue of eager consumers. Here, transparency operates first as a material element, exposing the interior in full view, and second as an idea of access, whereby everything appears available and offered without resistance. Access, however, is directed towards consumer goods rather than things at once more challenging and enriching – the living, autonomous agencies of Earth. Almost in mockery of this state, there is the stylized landscape printed onto the glass itself, paired with the phrase “wonder awaits” beneath the image. This pairing



Figure 1. Signs of enclosure: structured streets, manufactured wonder, absent nature (author's own, 2023).

introduces glamour at the threshold of access, tethering the promise of wonder to consumption and playing up to the human attraction to ecstatic unity, which cannot facilitate true ecological connection.

Indeed, in this manufactured environment, the conditions for meaningful encounter are largely foreclosed. Encounters with nonhuman agencies are likely to be brief and absorbed into the routines of urban life; only when this absorption fails will they register as interruptions – moments that are experienced as a wound. A wound is a breach in which the negativity of resistance becomes felt as exposure, vulnerability and presence. Wonder occurs with the intensification of presence in a positive direction, revealing that even within managed spaces, full relationality persists. Such wild relationships – which depend upon difference and otherness – defy the Megamachine, the disenchanting system through which capital, the state and technoscience coordinate to render the world manageable.

Reopening the possibility of presence

If the contemporary city operates as an apparatus of enclosure, then recognizing this forces a reconsideration of what counts as transformation and how efforts at change are to be interpreted. Accordingly, this section resists the urge to translate the above diagnosis directly into a programme or checklist, since the kinds of encounter that matter here cannot ever be guaranteed as regular outputs of design or governance (Curry, 2021).

Even well-intentioned change – aesthetic, infrastructural or regulatory – can occur without unsettling enclosure. In cities structured to anticipate disturbance, reforms may improve what appears in urban space while simultaneously ensuring that exposure remains discretionary and interruption fleeting. Their significance therefore depends on the level at which the change operates. Here it is worth drawing a distinction between *effects* and *conditions*. An effect is a genuine alteration that the city can register while still preserving its prevailing expectations. A condition is an alteration that reorganizes those expectations themselves, such as what counts as normal contact in the first place, as well as what kinds of interference are tolerated. Crucially, the distinction I am making is analytic rather than programmatic, since it does not prescribe interventions. Instead, it offers a way of differentiating between alterations the city can absorb and alterations in the conditions of inhabitation that would have to endure. With this in mind, it is possible to examine forms of urban change that appear progressive or reparative, using them as limit cases to illustrate the reassertion of enclosure.

Some contemporary approaches concretize and inherently reinforce the city's organizing tendencies. Smart-city systems exemplify the desire for totalizing control by embedding anticipatory governance and data-driven management into the already closely regulated character of the built domain (Kitchin, 2014). These systems are frequently justified through arguments closely aligned with ecomodernism, which extol technological optimization alongside urban intensification as environmentally responsible means of reducing ecological impact while safeguarding nature elsewhere (Asafu-Adjaye

et al., 2015). In Han's (2022) terms, smart systems eliminate the resistance inherent in the terrestrial order of the Earth. Openness takes the form of smooth informational transactions and operational transparency, rather than exposure or vulnerability, and is therefore fully pre-scripted and supervised.

The same impulse re-emerges in forms of urban change that appear less as overt control than as 'nature-positive' repair. In this case, the question we must necessarily ask concerns how nonhuman life is framed as acceptable within environmental governance, rather than which specific ecological interventions are introduced at the level of design. As Curry (2017) argues, when nature is approached primarily through instrumental outlooks, the possibility for fully ecological relationships – as signalled by enchantment – is reduced, since nonhuman beings are approached less as responsive others than as elements to be calibrated or optimized. Sullivan (2017) shows that such governance incorporates nonhuman life only insofar as it can be translated into anthropocentric schemes that make it legible and administratively manageable, privileging aggregate gains and functional value over situated ecological interdependence. When this managerial imperative is taken up in urban contexts, the return of nature to cities can increase the presence of nonhuman life while that presence is still received primarily as amenity (service provision), atmosphere (aesthetic enhancement) or even branding (sustainability markers) – a type of 'greening' that remains compatible with the marketable framing of mainstream reformist environmentalism (a framing criticized in Spash, 2024). The city becomes greener, yet the living world remains at a distance, encountered selectively and readily assimilated into the smooth reproduction of the urban milieu.

Other interventions attempt to target advertising spectacle, which contributes to enclosure by pervading the spaces in which ecological connection might occur. For instance, practices such as 'subvertizing' and 'brandalism' seek to interrupt the circulation of images by altering advertising surfaces, exposing contradictions and undermining the glamour that consumer capital deploys. As Harold (2004) argues, such tactics remain primarily representational, intervening at the level of meaning and symbolism rather than addressing the systems they seek to critique, and thereby inadvertently perpetuating those systems. Even so, more structural measures do not necessarily touch the conditions of exposure. Where outdoor advertising is removed altogether, as in well-known municipal initiatives such as São Paulo's 2006 *Lei Cidade Limpa* ("Clean City Law"), perceptual space may be cleared without exposure becoming a durable fact of everyday urban existence.

As analyzed above, enclosure refers to the prevailing spatial, material and perceptual structuring of life that minimizes exposure in advance. Within this structuring, alterations or openings are taken up in ways that ensure the city does not have to reorganize itself. The core concern, then, is not simply which reforms should be pursued, but whether exposure, understood as unguarded vulnerability, can endure. What matters is whether moments of openness can persist structurally as part of the ordinary conditions of urban existence – carrying with them the negativity that resists assimilation and making

instances of the wound more likely within an otherwise smooth field of experience – or whether what they introduce is steadily reintegrated into managed and predictable forms. In practice, this is why change within cities so often succeeds as improvement while failing to endure at the level of conditions, not because openings never occur, but because their persistence would destabilize the city's governing rationality.

The argument made throughout this paper cannot culminate in a plan. Instead, it puts forward an ethic of restraint. It refuses the assumption that residual openness is a flaw to be engineered away, and instead treats exposure and vulnerability as a valuable openness to the world. This stance aligns with ecological ethics understood as a horizon that orients practice through lived relations with the more-than-human world, which is far more demanding than any rule-based framework or managerial system (Curry, 2017). On this account, an ecocentric city would require a willingness to endure disruption over time. This entails the ability to accept that presence cannot be produced on demand but only arises where exposure is no longer pre-empted.

In closing, it should be clear that the perspective developed here is not entirely anti-urban, nor is it anti-civilizational, since cities are homes that the human animal has fashioned upon the Earth. At their best – quiet, green and venerable – they actively foster human culture and heritage, while also sustaining ecological presence. Yet even the busiest and most nature-sparse conurbations may gather human and nonhuman lives into shared worlds. Despite all barriers and constraints, the other side of enclosure nevertheless remains reachable. This follows from the fact that exposure to the other-than-human may still occur within urban life, and that the possibility of presence – blooming into full-blown wonder – can never be fully eliminated. We must therefore not reject the city as the enemy, nor idealize escape from it. Instead, it is important to resist the assumption that urban existence must be sealed against what lies beyond human purposes. Instead of seeking to control or turn away from the city altogether, the more subtle and challenging task is to ask how to open it.

References

- Asafu-Adjaye J, Blomqvist L, Brand S *et al.* (2015) An Ecomodernist Manifesto. Available at <https://www.ecomodernism.org/> (accessed April 2026).
- Curry P (2013) Radical metaphor: Or why place, nature and narrative are each other but aren't themselves. *EarthLines* 6: 35–8.
- Curry P (2017) *Ecological Ethics: An introduction* (2nd edition). Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Curry P (2019) *Enchantment: Wonder in modern life*. Floris Books, Edinburgh, UK.
- Curry P (2021) The experience of enchantment and the sense of wonder. *Green Letters: Studies in ecocriticism* 25: 115–29.
- Gray J and Crist E (2024) Introduction. In: Gray J and Crist E, eds. *Cohabiting Earth*. SUNY Press, Albany, NY, USA.
- Han B-C (2015) *Saving Beauty*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Han B-C (2021) *Capitalism and the Death Drive*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Han B-C (2022) *Non-things: Upheaval in the lifeworld*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

- Harold C (2004) Pranking rhetoric: 'Culture jamming' as media activism. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21: 189–211.
- Hood T (2025) Through the wound, the world. Presented at: *International Ecoliteracy Research Festival* (oral). Himmelbjerggården, Denmark, 14–15 August. Available at <https://othersider.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/through-the-wound-the-world-final.pdf> (accessed March 2026).
- Horkheimer M and Adorno T (2002) The concept of enlightenment. In: Schmid Noerr G, ed. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. Jephcott E). Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, USA: 1–34.
- Kitchin R (2014) The real-time city? Big data and smart urbanism. *GeoJournal* 79: 1–14.
- Mumford L (1967) *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and human development*. Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, NY, USA.
- Spash CL (2024) Social ecological transformation of economies: Where the environmental movement went wrong and what is needed. In: Gray J and Crist E, eds. *Cohabiting Earth*. SUNY Press, Albany, NY, USA.
- Sullivan S (2017) Noting some effects of fabricating 'nature' as 'natural capital'. *The Ecological Citizen* 1: 65–73.
- Weber M (1946) Science as a vocation. In: Gerth HH and Mills CW, eds. *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* (trans. Gerth HH and Mills CW). Oxford University Press, New York, USA: 129–56.