

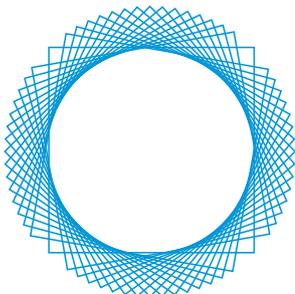
## **Healthy and Liveable Cities**

### **Gesunde und lebenswerte Städte**

*Joint Center "Urban Systems" at the University of Duisburg-Essen*

*Profilschwerpunkt „Urbane Systeme“ der Universität Duisburg-Essen*

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**Essener Forum**  
Baukommunikation

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**On the 'Cultural Dimension of Sustainability'  
in Urban Systems: Urban Cultures as Ecological  
'Force-Fields' in Processes of Sustainable  
Development**

*Jens Martin Gurr (University of Duisburg-Essen) and  
Martin Butler (University of Oldenburg)*

**I. Introduction: On the Aim and Scope of this Paper**

Over the last years, 'sustainability,' or 'sustainable development,' has been one of the – often over-used and therefore frequently fuzzy – buzzwords both in political debates and in academia. Against the backdrop of a number of pressing climatic, political and economic challenges – with the current global financial crisis being only one symptomatic manifestation – it seems as if 'sustainable development,' i.e. a development that "meet[s] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs",<sup>1</sup> has indeed turned from an option into an obligation, especially when it comes to discussing the problems and challenges of the continuously growing urban areas all over the world.

*It has only been very recently that questions about sustainable development with regard to the cultural challenges of the 21st century have been raised.*

It is interesting, however, that the debates and discussions revolving around the topic of 'sustainability' have been, first and foremost, concerned with economic, ecological and, at

times, socio-political issues. It has only been very recently that questions about sustainable development with regard to the cultural challenges of the 21st century have been raised. Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg, for example, in their 2008 collection of essays *Sustainability: A New Frontier for the Arts and Culture* hint at the "cultural dimension of sustainability" (Brocchi 2008, 26) and thus underline the dire need to also approach the issue of 'sustainable development' from a Cultural Studies perspective. To be precise, what could be at stake here are, first, questions that ask for the cultural consequences of climatic, social, demographic, political and economic changes and developments, and, second, and more importantly, questions that ask for the specific role of culture (and, as a consequence, of Cultural Studies) in the development of strategies that may contribute to fostering sustainable development in cities.

*Urban culture is one of the central parameters in processes of fostering sustainable development in urban systems.*

Focusing on the latter set of questions, this contribution argues that urban culture is one of the central parameters in processes of fostering sustainable development in urban systems, as it constitutes a quasi-ecological 'force-field' which serves both a *seismographic* as well as a *catalytic* function in urban environments. Thus drawing on major

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Brundtland Report, <<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/42/ares42-187.htm>>. In other words, it is a development which aims at the "reconciliation of social justice, ecological integrity, and the well being of all living systems on the planet [...] without compromising future generations" (Moore, qtd. in Kagan 2008, 15).

concepts from ecocriticism, we argue that urban cultural practices and forms of expression both react to and contribute to making sense of the dramatic demographic, economic, political, and ecological challenges the metropolis has to face in the early 21st century; in so doing, we maintain, they bear a particularly *regenerative* potential. Incorporating a theoretical conceptualization of urban culture and a selection of case studies from Anglophone contexts, our paper thus sets out to contribute to an awareness of the 'cultural dimension of sustainability.'

## **II. Urban Cultures as Seismographs and Catalysts: Exploring the Regenerative Function of Cultural Forms of Expression**

We begin our argument with a brief exploration of some of the basic assumptions within the field of Urban Cultural Studies, which, we believe, has gained particular importance in recent years due to constantly accelerating processes of urbanization worldwide, which have been based on or accompanied by a number of demographic changes resulting from globalization, mass migration and new forms of social and cultural mobility.

Our approach starts from the assumption that any analysis of cultural forms of expression which originate in urban contexts needs to take into account that these forms of expression are by no means detached from their environment, but, in a number of intricate ways, are shaped by and tied to a range of the very specific infrastructural, architectural and technological parameters that constitute this environment. Moreover, we believe that such urban cultural practices and manifestations are particularly relevant for specific individual or collective actors within these environments: They provide opportunities for critical reflection on processes of urban development and change as well as on the limitations and restrictions set by highly technologized and functionalized metropolitan settings; they serve as ways of expressing and articulating individual and collective identities, which, particularly in urban agglomerations, where cultures and ethnicities constantly mix and mingle, seems to be of vital importance;

## *Urban cultural practices and manifestations provide opportunities for critical reflection on processes of urban development and change.*

and they may also work as a location factor for businesses and cultural 'elites.' As recent studies have convincingly illustrated,<sup>2</sup> urban culture is of measurable, significant and immediate economic relevance.

Against the backdrop of this interplay between urban culture and its environment, we believe that it is most fruitful to conceive of urban culture as a quasi-ecological system, which, as a dynamic and cybernetic entity, develops according to its own logic and rules.<sup>3</sup> We claim that such an understanding of urban culture, which takes up central ideas of some of the more recent strands of ecocriticism, 1) allows us to systematically conceptualize the dynamic interplay between urban cultures and their environments, (also) because it allows for the integration of a number of different disciplinary

2 For the economic importance of culture and its role as a factor in attracting creative elites, cf. Florida, *Rise of the Creative Class* and Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class*. For the use of such factors in city marketing, cf. for instance Gold & Ward as well as Kearns & Philo. Florida's theses, however, are frequently simplistic and problematic. In addition to potentially overstating the contribution of specific forms of culture to an attractive economic milieu – theses which have led a number of cities to strategically target "creative segments" of the population in their urban development strategies –, the concomitant instrumentalization of art and artists has also met with significant resistance with artists refusing to be commodified as mere location factors conducive to the 'bohemian index' of a city. Cf. for instance the much-publicized protest of artists in Hamburg against such endeavours: "Kunst als Protest: Lasst den Scheiß!" (2009).

3 We are aware that, in the comparison between an ecological system and culture, the term 'ecological' most often is only employed and understood metaphorically. However, it is one of our aims in this contribution to show that and how 'cultural ecology' can also be taken literally.

approaches and 2) thus provides us with a theoretical framework that may serve as the starting point to 'literalize' the metaphor of 'cultural ecology' and to underline the role of Urban Cultural Studies in processes fostering sustainable urban development.

To begin with, it would seem that, given the strong interest in ecocritical approaches and in urban studies in recent years or even decades, an application of ecocritical concepts to the study of the metropolis lies close at hand. However, while some forays into this domain have been made (cf. Bennett 2001 and Bennett and Teague 1999) most studies in ecocriticism – both classics in the field and more recent work – have remarkably little to say about *urban* cultures.<sup>4</sup> We therefore propose to heed Bennett's still pertinent warning that "ecocriticism will continue to be a relatively pale and undertheorized field unless and until it more freely ventures into urban environments" (Bennett 1999, 304).<sup>5</sup>

One approach from this field which particularly lends itself to a conceptualization of urban culture as an ecological system is the model of literature as cultural ecology outlined by Hubert Zapf, which, though it explicitly focuses on literary texts, is particularly useful for the analysis and description of the dialectical and quasi-ecological relationship between forms of cultural expression and their specific contexts. We maintain that, by way of a few terminological and conceptual modifications, it is thus also transferable to the realm of urban culture, which may well be conceived of as a dynamic ecological system subject to constant change, too. In his approach, Zapf outlines a functional theory of literary texts which is based on the assumption that the system of literature in many respects resembles an ecological system (cf. Zapf 2001, 90ff.). Enumerating a number of striking analogies between the two, particularly highlighting their dynamic and complex nature,<sup>6</sup> he concludes that "the specific procedures of literature bear some interesting similarities to [...] ecological principles [...] Indeed, they appear to a significant extent as the transformation into language and symbolic action of some of those characteristic principles" (Zapf 2001, 90). Zapf also points out that the

similarity between an ecological system and literature is predominantly due to the specific aesthetic strategies employed by the literary imagination, when he claims that

literature is an ecological force within culture not only or not even primarily because of its content, but because of the specific way in which it has evolved as a unique form of textuality that, in its aesthetic transformation of cultural experience, employs procedures in many ways analogous to ecological principles, restoring complexity, vitality and creativity to the discourses of its cultural world by symbolically reconnecting them with elemental forces and processes of life – in non-human nature, in the collective and individual psyche, in the human body."<sup>7</sup> (93)

Following from this, the symbolic system of literature turns into a socially and culturally productive agent and,

by its aestheticising transgression of immediate referentiality, becomes an ecological force-field within culture, a subversive yet regenerative semiotic energy which, though emerging from and responding to a given socio-historical situation, still gains relative independence as it unfolds the counter-discursive potential of the imagination in the symbolic act of reconnecting abstract cultural realities to concrete life processes. (88)

4 Cf. for instance the special issue of *Anglia* (2006), Glotfelty & Fromm, Kerridge & Sammels, Garrard's otherwise helpful volume, even Armbruster & Wallace's programmatically titled collection *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, though calling for a turn to "less obviously 'natural' landscapes," (4) contains no contribution which in any sustained way works towards an urban turn in ecocriticism.

5 Buell (23) has correctly, we believe, remarked on due attention to urban concerns as a key feature distinguishing what he calls "second-wave ecocriticism" from the more narrow first-wave ecocriticism primarily concerned with nature writing.

6 For a detailed elaboration on these analogies, cf. Zapf, "Literature" 88ff. Cf. also Zapf, *Literatur* and Zapf, "Das Funktionsmodell" 60ff.

## *In accordance with Zapf's ideas, we conceive of 'urban culture as an ecological force-field within urban systems.'*

Starting from his notion of literature as an 'ecological force-field within culture,' Zapf then argues that "this cultural-ecological function of literature can be described as a combination of three main purposes," (93) which he further specifies as those of a 'cultural-critical metadiscourse,' an 'imaginative counter-discourse,' and a 'reintegrative inter-discourse.' While the three purposes Zapf proposes are highly fruitful for a systematic analysis of urban culture, they are not particularly relevant for our argument, thus we will refrain from describing them in closer detail here. What is more important is his metaphor of a 'force-field,' as it bears a particular potential for Urban Cultural Studies which has not been fully acknowledged so far.

This potential, to be precise, lies in the very possibility of transferring the idea of 'literature as an ecological force-field within culture,' which lies at the heart of Zapf's approach, to another level of metaphorical abstraction and of applying it to an urban context. Consequently, and in accordance with Zapf's idea, we may well conceive of 'urban culture as an ecological force-field within urban systems.' Yet, though such a transfer seems to work smoothly at first sight, Zapf's concept needs to be modified, or rather extended, as such a 'force-field within urban systems' does not, of course, exist without individual and collective actors which 'use' urban cultural forms of expression as a distinct means of communication. Thus, in order to incorporate the city dwellers into our quasi-ecological concept of urban culture, we consider it fruitful to extend the 'force-field'-metaphor by taking recourse to Michel de Certeau's ideas concerning the description and

analysis of practices of everyday life. In so doing, we are able to conceptualize theoretically both the communicative acts of city dwellers and the cultural practices and artifacts brought forth by them through these very acts. What does this mean, however, in more specific terms? Generally conceiving of the study of popular culture as being concerned with "the battles or games between the strong and the weak, and with the 'actions' which remain possible for the latter," (34) de Certeau sets out to describe the nexus between cultural 'output' and cultural 'use' and distinguishes between "a rationalized, expansionist, centralized [...] production" and a "devious, dispersed [consumption] characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation, its poaching, [which] shows itself not in its own products [...] but in an art of using those imposed on it [by the dominant economic order]" (xiif., 31). Accordingly, he introduces his notion of "strategies," which denote the institutions, rules, regimes and physical objects and limitations imposed by those in power as opposed to "tactics," which he defines as the "ruses and surprises: clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the 'strong,'" as the subversive appropriation by the powerless of what is imposed on them by the powerful (35f., 40). Though de Certeau's concept indeed bears ideological overtones in this all too binary opposition of the 'weak' and the 'strong,' his ideas help clarify the processes of interaction and communication between urban spaces and its human protagonists. In this sense, city dwellers, who are confronted with a specific urban setting limited by infrastructural and technological parameters, may apply an individualized set of 'tactics' to come to terms with this pre-structured setting in a number of individual ways and for a range of different purposes.<sup>7</sup> In other words, in order to cope with what Henri Lefebvre called "representations of space," i.e. "conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists,

7 For the need to consider not only "the view from below" but also to understand "the structuring of the city as a whole, the more macro-view of urbanism, the political economy of the urban process," cf. Soja, "Six Discourses" 189f.

technocratic subdividers and social engineers,” (38) the city dweller thus “mak[es] symbolic use of its objects” (39) via forms of performative and/or imaginary cultural practices.

Against the backdrop of the ideas and concepts outlined so far, which have been introduced as modifications and extensions necessary to apply the theoretical concept of the ‘force-field’ to the study of urban culture, we may now propose a (re)conceptualization of urban culture which fruitfully incorporates the ideological impetus of both Zapf’s functional model and de Certeau’s notions of strategic regulation and of tactical appropriation: Accordingly, we conceive of urban culture as a particular set of cultural practices which are both highly determined by their urban situatedness, i.e. they are tied to the very spatiality of a particular cityscape, and contribute to shaping and changing our awareness of this spatiality, as in various types of street art and guerilla gardening (cf. fig. 1).

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1 The subversive use of urban infrastructure in street art, clearly aiming to change perceptions of urban space. Source: Banksy. *Wall and Piece*. London: Century, 2006.

In the most active sense of the word, urban cultural forms of expression *re-present* urban spaces: They reflect and comment upon forms and functions of architectural and infrastructural designs and thus may be said to work as a “cultural-critical metadiscourse” (*sensu* Zapf); in processes of constant transgression and subversion, they create alternative spaces and thus function as an imaginary (and, at times, very concrete) counter-discourse; and, subversive as such practices may be, they only exist on, at or in (and thus due to) a specific architectural or infrastructural given, i.e. they, by definition, reintegrate the ideologically peripheral with manifestations of hegemonic power in the very moment of their being produced, installed or performed. Consequently, considering the processual and performative nature of urban cultural practices, they may well be characterized both by a ‘seismographic momentum’ in that they react to, or ‘track,’ urban transformations in a very sensitive way, and a ‘catalytic momentum’ in that they actively interpret, make sense of, foster and even instigate technological, infrastructural and climatic changes and challenges.



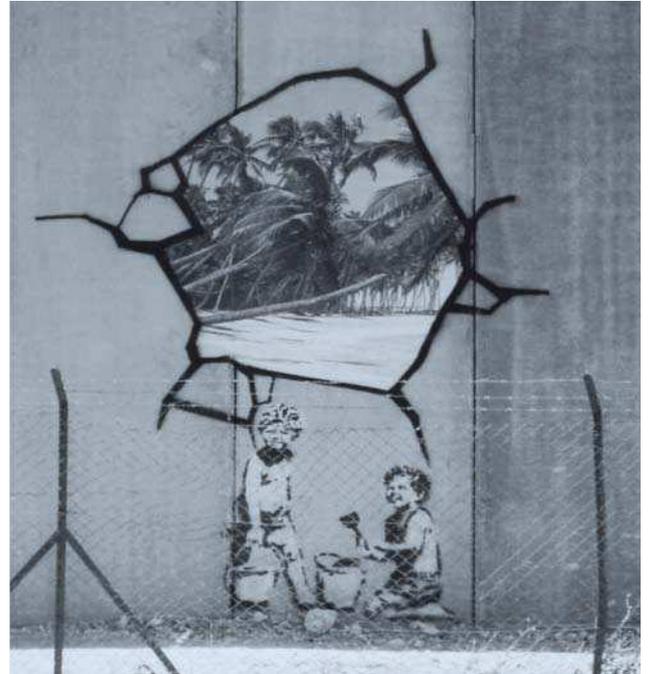
2 The 'seismographic' potential of urban cultural expression as 'cultural-critical meta-discourse' critically commenting on contemporary developments as illustrated by Banksy. Source: Banksy. *Wall and Piece*. London: Century, 2006.

### III. Street Art and Metropolitan Culture:

#### The Case of Banksy and Slinkachu

In order to put this model of urban culture as a seismographic and catalytic force-field to the test, i.e. in order to both illustrate its analytical surplus value and to identify further theoretical and methodological modifications and extensions, we would now like to focus on two examples of urban cultural practices, as they not only serve to indicate the vast variety of ways of appropriating urban spaces, but – due to an extensive media coverage – also have assumed a prominent position within recent discussions of the social, political and economic significance of urban culture.

A first case illustrating the seismographic and catalytic function of urban cultural expression is the work of London-based graffiti artist Banksy. A particularly striking example of this artist's ingenious use (or abuse) of urban spaces and surfaces for a subversive "tactical" appropriation of strategically imposed infrastructures is his critical comment on the tendency for total CCTV camera surveillance in London in an enormous caption of "One Nation under CCTV" right in the field of vision of a surveillance camera (cf. fig. 2) – a truly counter-hegemonic statement which critically tracks current



3 The 'catalytic' potential of urban cultural expression as an 'imaginative counter-discourse' in the creation of alternative spaces and worlds as illustrated by Banksy. Source: Banksy. *Wall and Piece*. London: Century, 2006.

political developments and tendencies, but which, at the same time, depends on the very infrastructure it attempts to criticize, as it materializes on its concrete surface.

Equally political, and similarly reintegrating the hegemonic and the subversive, are Banksy's visionary 2005 illustrations of children joyfully playing on a beach or of stretches of blue sky left on the grey concrete surface of the West Bank barrier near Bethlehem (cf. figure 3), or his spraying spree in New Orleans with works referencing the Katrina disaster (cf. "Protest aus der Dose").

Paradoxically, however, his defacements of urban spaces and surfaces themselves quickly become commodity products sold in posh art galleries. Urban space, appropriated and re-appropriated by individual city dwellers for their very own ends and purposes, thus turns into a site of struggle, a battle-



4a and 4b Slinkachu, "The Forgotten Soldier." London. Source: Slinkachu. *Little People in the City: The Street Art of Slinkachu*. London: Boxtree, 2008. 33.



5 Slinkachu, "They're not pets, Susan." London. Source: Slinkachu. *Little People in the City: The Street Art of Slinkachu*. London: Boxtree, 2008. 87.

field, so to speak, of contesting ideologies, viewpoints, dispositions manifest in cultural practices and forms of expression. Indeed, Banksy's skillful appropriations of urban spaces walk the thin line between subversion and containment. For several years now, there has literally been a form of Banksy tourism with guided tours to the sites of his nocturnal visitations – including published guidebooks referencing key locations (cf. Bull 2008)

Another case in point is London-based artist Slinkachu, who, for his street art installations *Little People in the City* (Slinkachu, *Little People*) arranges tiny plastic figures less than an inch in size (but with astonishing attention to detail) in amusing, dramatic, obscene or grotesque constellations and places them in various locations in the city – public parks, tube stations, shopping centres, train windows, phone booths or simply in the street. There is, for instance, a tiny figure looking up at a human-sized scaffolding with a minute note warning "Danger – Giants working above," an equestrian sculpture not even rising above the grass placed close to its life-sized "model," G.F. Watts's sculpture *Physical Energy* in Kensington Gardens (cf. figs. 4a and 4b), or a man, rifle still pointing at a dead bumble-bee about his size, telling a girl with her teddy bear hiding behind his back that "They're not pets, Susan" (cf. fig. 5).

The central work of art, though, arguably are not the figures themselves, but the photographs taken of the installations, usually two juxtaposed photographs – a wide-angle shot of the figures barely visible in their larger surroundings and a close-up revealing the details: One of the more astonishing such pairs of photographs are those of a real-life commuter on a London tube, reading a paper, with a minute replica (again, less than an inch in size), reading a miniature copy of the paper including tiny images and captions, arranged to sit on a tiny metal ledge just around a train window (cf. figs 6a and 6b). It is only once one has seen the close-up of the tiny figure in the window that one notices what initially seemed a mere speck of dust in the window next to the commuter in the photograph.

In all these cases, it is the juxtaposition of the tiny figures with their overwhelmingly large surroundings which replicates and intensifies the contrast between the human body, its individual actions and maneuvers, and its often overpowering urban surroundings.

Thus, though frequently striking in themselves, it is, more often than not, only the effect of the mediation by means of photographs and the caption underneath the photograph that gives the installations their full poignancy and their frequently subversive energy, as with the group of tiny policemen, police tape and an emergency vehicle to scale, next to a towering pile of dog dirt. What is merely a striking, amusing or grotesque installation, if photographed and captioned "Terror Alert," necessarily suggests political implications at a time when justified fear of terrorism leads to excessive measures of surveillance and control and when every dog turd may be suspicious in what is the world's most closely surveilled city (cf. fig. 7).

Finally, it is worth noting that it is only in the mediatized form of photographs that these installations can be turned into a marketable good, while the tiny installations themselves are gifts to be enjoyed and marveled at for free by anyone lucky enough to spot them.



The works of Banksy and Slinkachu thus exemplify most of our central notions and ideas outlined above: They subversively engage with the imposed or given surfaces and spaces of the city and by means of sheer size (or minuteness) and the materiality of their inscription onto or integration into these surfaces and spaces draw attention to their dimensions, turn apparently stable environments into fleeting projection screens for visions and revisions of a new urban order, humanize, semanticize and poeticize the forbidden, sterile and disenchanting concrete waste lands, and often playfully reveal an awareness of their own commodity value as fashionably subversive forms of cultural expression adding to the cultural prestige of the British capital and its reputation for *chic* urbanity.

Urban cultural practices, which are designed to work within the confines imposed upon the city inhabitant, may thus indeed take very different shapes, as these two examples have only hinted at. Moreover, as the analysis of Slinkachu's tactics of appropriating cityscapes has indicated, it seems that a systematic exploration of 'urban tactics' within the limits and boundaries of a metropolitan topography needs to resort to yet a further heuristic category, which can be described as the 'mediacy' of the urban cultural practice employed by individual or collective 'urban players' to appropriate and negotiate the spatial dimension of their very specific urban environment. This relational category yields a further specification of the forms and functions of urban cultural expression, as it provides a continuum between more direct and more indirect forms of negotiating urban space (cf. fig. 8).

Among the more direct 'tactics' of appropriating and redefining urban spaces are, e.g., forms of performance art that explore the architectural and technological constraints and possibilities of urban environments by integrating the human body into the geometrically exact and highly functional shapes of the city. Thus incorporating the living into the allegedly 'dead,'<sup>8</sup> the urban space is resemanticized and put into a new perspective. In contrast to performance

art, which frequently requires a specific setting and – in spite of its often spontaneous appearance – is basically a planned and directed action, (ab)using a given architectural and infrastructural cityscape may also happen 'on the spot,' e.g. in specifically urban forms of expression such as flash-mobs or sports such as skateboarding, BMX, or parkouring, which has recently been hyped as a new form of urban sports.

A particularly interesting form of such engagement in our context of 'urban culture and sustainability' is guerilla gardening, which frequently takes the form of beautifying and drawing attention to an otherwise highly unsustainable urban environment (cf. fig. 9).

Another form of immediate engagement with pre-structured urban environments may be seen in the use of walls, roofs or streets as 'canvases' for graffiti and murals, which, more often than not, do not only redefine urban spaces by changing the surface structure through coloring and iconic as well as non-referential forms of expression, but may also contribute to establishing feelings of a shared (ethnic) identity among a particular collective, e.g. by deliberately undermining established versions of colonial history, thus re-writing the past and subverting hegemonic ideologies, or by fostering a sense of shared identity against a hegemonic mainstream (cf. fig. 10).<sup>9</sup>

Streets, or rather the sidewalk and the traffic signs situated there, can also be appropriated subversively, for instance by creatively modifying a stop-sign to articulate protest against war.

8 For a fascinating history of the connection between the city and the human body from classical Athens to the present day, cf. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York, 1974); cf. also Elisabeth Grosz, "Bodies – Cities." *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York, 1995), 103-110.

9 For this, cf. for instance Eva Marsch, "The Construction of Ethnic Identities in Street Art," in *EthniCities: Ethnic Identities and Metropolitan Cultures in the Americas*, ed. Martin Butler, Jens Martin Gurr and Olaf Kaltmeier (Trier, 2011), 55-65.

These often merely “decorative” – or annoying, as aesthetic preferences vary – but frequently highly political and subversive forms of street art, although they have long had a cult following, have only recently begun to receive serious scholarly attention (cf. Lewisohn, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*; Reinecke *Street-Art*; Klitzke and Schmidt, *Street Art: Legenden zur Straße*) and have also seen a publishing boom as far as anthologies and collections of images are concerned. The direct ways of coming to terms with urban environments outlined above are, in the admittedly overwhelming realm of urban cultural forms of expression, complemented by more indirect forms of ‘dealing with’ the city in fictional and non-fictional ‘texts’ – in the broadest sense –, ranging from literature to city guides, from the daily news on television to the blockbuster about 9/11. Such medial representations, the sheer quantity of which seems to have been increasing in recent years, do not only articulate particular perspectives on the metropolis and/or give a voice to its inhabitants, but may also render dystopian or utopian urban scenarios, ‘possible spaces,’ so to speak, which make us aware of (hypothetical) consequences of processes of urbanization. Within urban culture, the city is thus frequently not only the site and location, but also the theme of cultural expression. Urban culture thus serves as a crucial medium of urban self-reflection.

## Urban culture serves as a crucial medium of urban self-reflection.

What this short enumeration of some examples once more helps to illustrate is that both the mediate and immediate tactics of appropriating or negotiating the metropolis, the variety of which still needs to be explored in further detail and in a more systematic and comprehensive way, must not be exclusively conceived of as (critical or non-critical) reactions to urban spaces, as *seismographs*, so to speak,

tracking urban developments and changes in a very sensitive manner. On the contrary, assuming that urban cultural forms of expression do indeed constitute a ‘force-field’ within the larger infrastructural, technological and architectural framework of the metropolis, these tactics, as a kind of *catalyst*, also contribute to shaping our view of the city and thus, being socially and culturally productive, potentially have a significant impact on our understanding and perception of the environment most of us live in.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it is not only people’s perception of the city that is altered by cultural forms of expression which use or represent urban spaces. It is the actual development of the city itself which is closely tied to medial representations and appropriations of the metropolis, as Faßler points out, going so far as to state that “urban developments are historically inseparable from media evolutions.”<sup>11</sup>

It may well be argued – and Richard Florida and his more uncritical followers have insistently done so – that vibrant urban culture is a significant factor in contributing to the perception of a city as a “metropolis” for the “creative class,” though we may be less prone to exaggerate the significance of culture in this regard if we see a vibrant scene as *indicative* of a metropolitan “feel.” Nonetheless, against the backdrop of the observations made in this essay, it seems vital to conceive of urban culture as an active, highly productive and thus socially, economically and politically relevant parameter in the overall dynamics of change and development in urban systems.

10 For the production of city images and the effects of such fictional and documentary images of the city and of self-projected images of different types of cities, cf. Short’s chapter “City Images”; John Rennie Short, *The Urban Order: An Introduction to Cities, Culture, and Power* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 414-462.

11 Cf. Manfred Faßler, “Vorwort: Umbrüche des Städtischen,” in Faßler, ed., *Die Zukunft des Städtischen: Urban Fictions* (Munich, 2006), 9-35, 21, our translation. For the close correspondence between views of the city and developments in literature and the arts, cf. several of the contributions in Manfred Smuda, ed., *Die Großstadt als “Text”* (Munich, 1992). For the way in which fictional images of a city – especially filmic images – come to physically shape the real city, cf. Norman Klein, “Die Imaginäre Stadt: Abwesenheit und Scripted Spaces,” in Regina Bittner, ed., *Die Stadt als Event: Zur Konstruktion Urbaner Erlebnisräume*. Edition Bauhaus, vol. 10 (Frankfurt, 2001), 225-231.

#### **IV. By Way of Conclusion: On the (Changing) Role of Urban Cultural Studies**

As we have shown, urban cultural practices and forms of expression, from an ecocritical perspective, indeed function as constituents of a highly active, quasi-ecological 'force-field,' the shifts and movements of which are quintessential for the development of the metropolis. They can thus be conceived of as powerful forms of social interaction and communication that do indeed have a regenerative function, not only, or rather: no longer, metaphorically speaking, but in the most literal sense of the word.

*Urban culture is an active, highly productive and thus socially, economically and politically relevant parameter in the overall dynamics of change and development in urban systems.*

The important role culture plays in the dynamics of urban systems and, in turn, the role an analysis of culture may play in the attempt of fostering sustainable urban development, is also highlighted by Jon Hawkes's 2001 study *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning*. Hawkes points out that "cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability. In order for public planning to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environ-

*Urban Cultural Studies, assume a new position as a politically, culturally and economically relevant approach to the study of culture that sets out to contribute to an ecologically reasonable and responsible development of urban systems.*

mental and economic impact assessment" (vii). He goes on to explain that "[w]hat most of us have known all along, and recent studies have affirmed, is that there are many values informing our society that run counter to those based simply on the production of goods [i.e. economic issues] [...] These values need to play a stronger role in the design of public policy" (11).

With analyses like these, it becomes evident that the examination of cultural forms of expression within urban environments – what Hawkes describes as an "integrated framework for cultural evaluation" (vii) – may indeed work as a basis for actual political decision-making processes. Urban Cultural Studies, we believe, thus assume a new position in that the metaphorical terminology of ecocriticism – 'urban culture as a regenerative force within an urban ecosystem' – can be understood as a quite literal call for a politically, culturally and economically relevant approach to the study of culture that sets out to contribute to an ecologically reasonable and responsible development of urban systems.<sup>12</sup>

12 This essay has also been published in *Generative Process, Patterns, and the Urban Challenge: Fall 2011 International PUARL Conference*. Ed. Hajo Neis, Gabriel Brown, Jens Martin Gurr and J. Alexander Schmidt. Portland, OR: PUARL Press, 2012. 77-86.

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