

Urban Community in the Postmodern Urban Context

VAIDAS JAKUTIS

Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Creative Industries, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, 1 Trakų Street, 01132 Vilnius, Lithuania
Email: vaidas.jks@gmail.com

Society faces various daily urban living problems – cities are becoming denser, green spaces and recreation areas for citizens are at the bottom of the policymakers' priority list, and infrastructure decisions mainly satisfy business interests. We stand in traffic jams for hours. At the same time, climate change makes it increasingly difficult for cities to live in every summer. To understand how society should operate these challenges to shift the urban environment in the desired direction, empowering city dwellers and allowing them to participate in this multi-layered phenomenon entirely, we must fundamentally understand the importance of the *urban community*. The central thesis of this paper is that in urban studies, it is necessary to discuss what an urban community is and in what critical dimensions it shapes the identity of a city, or vice versa, the city shapes it. This article presents an interdisciplinary scientific literature analysis conducted using the method of comparative analysis to identify critical dimensions of a contemporary *urban community*.

Keywords: urban community, urban identity, perception of reality, digitality, virtuality, urban networks, habitus

INTRODUCTION

Today, as humanity faces increasing problems of survival and comfortable existence, it is important to understand and realise that community and diverse cooperation can be the key to a successful and fulfilling future of society (Perez, Jayone 2022). As more and more of the world's population moves to live in cities, as urban populations grow, this (urban) environment is becoming increasingly important and complex (Rosengren et al. 2022). Thousands of systems exist to control all this chaos, but ultimately, these systems have their own existential and evolutionary goals (Arstein 2019; Sennett 2012). The mechanism is truly impressive and complex. Add to all that complexity climate change, constant clashes between various social groups, the ever-accelerating housing crisis, and there is a whole other endless list of daily problems that every city dweller faces. Here, the question arises whether it is possible to improve such an environment somehow and make it friendly to everyone (Zwangsleitner et al. 2022).

The primary objective of this paper is to analyse interdisciplinary scientific literature and activate a discussion about the ability to understand *urban communities* and their complexity. The fundamental question we aim to address is the following: What constitutes an *urban*

community, and how should it be approached as a research subject? We propose to revisit the various dilemmas surrounding the understanding of urban communities by re-evaluating the critical criteria that should be considered in advance. To achieve this, we will analyse the selected scientific literature through the lens of ontological relativism. By employing the comparative analysis method, we will identify the key discourses that define the critical dimensions of modern urban communities in diverse urban settings.

URBAN ENVIRONMENT

The concept of the *creative city* introduced by C. Landry (1994) and the concept of the *creative class* that followed it by R. Florida (2002) seem to reflect the identity of a changing city – *urban habitus* (as P. Bourdieu would call it). In the scope of this paper, we will not expand the creative city concept with a discussion of its discourses. However, we will agree that getting the creative city status for all urban environments is an aspiration. Moreover, it is an aspiration that all cities seek because it provides certain wealth (from material to intangible). The creativity layer also provides a foundation for the development of urban concepts. All these aspirations are not homogeneous, and it is not easy to define how to become one (Betlej, Kačerauskas 2021). All concepts and statuses, or we can absolutise those to *change in urban habitus* – all this essentially reflects the direction we are moving at a general level. Trends change – *habitus* also changes since it reflects the entire broad spectrum of capitals contained in it. As P. Bourdieu would add, 'Habitus is not, as some people imagine, fate. Being a product of history, habitus is an open system of dispositions that depends on experience, which means that it is constantly influenced by it in such a way that its structures either strengthen or change. It is durable, but not eternal' (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2003: 172). In this case, the *urban habitus* to be achieved is liberal and open, striving to become a medium for creating added value, experiments, and the search for a happy society. The question arises of whether the city dictates *the habitus of the citizens* or whether the citizens create *the habitus of the city* through the networks of social relations they create.

As stated by R. Florida, a city is a 'machine for social innovation', and three important factors are required for smooth operation: 'innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity' – all these social processes involve groups of people (Florida et al. 2017). Processes in the cities generate most of the social innovations and create the most significant added value for the future society. All this involves cities' habitats mainly evolving in the urban environments (Busacca, Paladini 2022; Youtie et al. 2023). For *urban communities*, the city is not just a medium for their existence, i.e. simply a physical place where they operate created. The city is, for them, a goal, a means, and a way to experience community in the megacities' environments where the alienation is so prevalent spread (Arstein 2019; Koning et al. 2018; Sennett 2012; Giddens 2005).

Due to its versatility, this environment accommodates many groups of people obliged to act in one space. This requires creativity and sustainable innovation to find the best way to achieve this coexistence. Such an environment encourages creativity not only in the individual but also in groups of individuals. Therefore, it is precisely the urban environment that can enable innovation and the development of society in search of solutions for coexistence (Florida et al. 2017). The city, as a place operated by people, brings them together into numerous alliances, which are not always positive or negative but always encourage them to strive for better conditions for their existence in the city – whether it is improving housing, protesting against air pollution, fighting against the relentless development of construction or simply

gatherings seeking to introduce the cultural diversity that exists in the urban environment (Giddens 2005).

The urban environment affects its dwellers through various dimensions. This process has become more complex through long-lasting and fastening urbanization years.¹ Now, urban environment-related concepts involve multidimensional phenomena like urban identity, a term that refers to a city's unique characteristics and culture. It has recently been elaborated in the research of M. Mansour et al. *The Challenges in Understanding Urban Identity*: '... the evolution of identity and urban identity concepts in academic literature reflects a growing recognition of the complex interplay between individuals, society, and the physical environment in shaping identities <...> people's urban identity, often referred to as urban social identity, focuses on the individual and collective identities of people in relation to the urban environment they inhabit' (Mansour et al. 2023: 118). Here, we can see that the urban environment is a complex socio-cultural network with an extensive range of effects on all the objects that form its essence and vice versa. However, through this analysis of interdisciplinary scientific literature, the emphasis is still mostly seen as the individual versus the city. Here, another discussion arises on whether the city dweller or the *urban community* makes the more significant difference for the urban environment as the main object of processes. Does the urban environment create city dwellers who form communities in the cities, or vice versa? To search for the answer to this dilemma, we can proceed through the view of *Critical Urban Theory* established by the *Frankfurt School* of urbanism, whose one of primary principle's is 'concern to excavate possibilities for alternative, radically emancipatory forms of urbanism that are latent, yet systemically suppressed, within contemporary cities' (Brenner 2009: 204). Ideally, this would fit the *urban communities* as the urban field's research object. It could be the key to this dilemma.

THE CONCEPT OF URBAN COMMUNITY

The concept of community has an extensive range of uses and a high distribution frequency. The Lithuanian author S. Nefas, who has written an overview of studies on research communities and also tries to define the more general concept of those, notes that 'in 1995, G. Hillary counted more than ninety definitions of community, which interpret community as a group, process, social system, geographical location, type of consciousness, set of views, a common way of life, possession of common segments, local autonomy and other meanings' (Nefas 2021: 44). Authors like J. Cobe define the community itself through the element of good created by the community – communality. Also, when discussing urban communities, we must remember one of the first classics – the well-known sociologist and anthropologist who wrote about metropolis and society, G. Simmel. The author emphasises that 'human relations are defined by the way interrelated people think, which is based on spiritual things that are developed through social contacts' (Nefas 2021: 44–46). Many concepts and notions have changed, disappeared, and emerged depending on the field and context in which it was necessary to define community. We can understand the importance of the concept through the purpose of the group of individuals it defines, such as *urban communities*, through the co-creation of the city's vision and participation in the city's development and growth (Koning et al. 2016).

¹ According to *Global Change Data Lab*, a non-profit organisation, which in cooperation with researchers at the University of Oxford produce academic research on the world's largest problems based on the empirical analysis of global data. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization> [27-01-2025].

As S. Nefas describes, 'It is precisely in local communities that we can see that a certain action is taking place – institutional, cultural, social (we call such a local community functional, in other words, active, working), and it is precisely in a functional local community that a certain way of life (customs, traditions) is formed' (Nefas 2006: 83). The local rather than the institutional or formal aspect of the community is important in this paper because the city, as a place, is the source of the fastest and the most prominent changes (Kahn 2018; Koning et al. 2016; Chick 2012). Moreover, *participation in the community* in the urban environment becomes one of the key aspects and components. If we slightly changed the construction of S. Nefas definition of the local community by focusing not on the functional local community but on the urban community in general, we could describe it as follows: an *urban community* is a functional group of people living in a city and performing actions for its benefit, which gives rise to shared interests and an inner feeling that they belong to the same group of citizens (Nefas 2021: 147).

New forms of activism and urban movements are emerging, and urban mobilisation is increasing. Urban movements cover the entire spectrum, from 'informal groups and protest initiatives, through nongovernmental organizations, to political committees' (Orchowska 2024: 60). However, the models of public interest management are not working as they should. The role of *urban communities* and citizens is weak, and they do not feel they have enough influence on how urban change occurs (Arstein 2019; Koning et al. 2018, 2016; Sennett 2012). This can be seen at different levels in many societies, although the differences also lie in cultural capital. For example, we can compare the perception of community participation in the southern countries of Europe (such as Spain or Portugal) and the post-soviet European block (such as Lithuania or Latvia). In the countries occupied by the Soviet Union, the idea of a '*collective farm*' community was forcibly eradicated, and the country has an aftertaste of traumatic experience about it (Pajovič 2022). During the Soviet occupation, the community was strictly formalised and had a more symbolic existence, so after liberation, restoring the community's functionality became a real challenge so that it would motivate and have a purpose and not simply continue to remain a declarative artifact.

On the contrary, community is often understood as a way to achieve meaningful things. As a result, in various media, one can notice relatively more examples of successful projects based on community, especially in the southern regions – Barcelona and Lisbon (Fassi, Manzini 2022; Giddens 2005). The community has been functional there for ages. Therefore, it is more effective than on the opposite side of Europe. Here, the archaic legacy of community as tradition, which is a result of the historical and cultural factors that have shaped these communities, is passed down from generation to generation (Sennett 2012). Of course, the general disappointment with the influence of community, especially in groups of people who fall into more vulnerable groups of society, is felt worldwide (Perez, Jayone 2022; Arstein 2019; Sennett 2012). As S. R. Arstein notes, we often see particular frustration when '*no-body*' tries to become '*something*' with the power to influence institutions to respond to their views, aspirations and needs. At the same time, actual results show up when power is achieved through the sharing of power among citizens and self-empowerment, which does not arise from the fact that city institutions grant it because nothing new is happening with them. Historically, they have always been accustomed (and still are) to cling to the power they have, which they do not want to give to anyone (Arstein 2019).

CONSTRUCTION OF POSTMODERN URBAN COMMUNITY

When turning to postmodernity, we need to supplement the concept of *urban communities* with E. Manzini's studies and his theory of *postmodern communities* (Fassi, Manzini 2022). E. Manzini distinguishes an important principle of the formation of today's *urban communities*, which is also one of the main principles of such groups – the primary origin of community creation is some project basis. The emergence of such communities is influenced by the desire of the city dwellers to implement some projects (Fassi, Manzini 2022). The scale of the project does not matter – what is important is the idea, value, inclusion and attraction. While observing societal changes in all urban contexts, society is increasingly moving towards a project-based models – from people's daily work or leisure to forming life goals or the meaning of one's existence. This model has been widely established through research in different fields (Carpenter, Horvath 2022; Fassi, Manzini 2022).

Thus, in the *postmodern urban community* – only communities that have emerged on this basis become extremely attractive. They are created based on solving a specific problem. After the goal is implemented, the urban community decides whether involvement and further activity can still exist or whether the implementation of the project will become the end of the community. According to E. Manzini and D. Fassi, 'being part of projects that contribute to the quality of a neighbourhood generates a sense of belonging and therefore of identity' (Fassi, Manzini 2022: 13). Therefore, the question of the community's sustainability arises, since it is important how the goal of such a community is implemented and understood among its members, how new members are attracted and how existing ones are retained. The hidden goal of such communities is also a dilemma: how to make them sustainable, i.e. when necessary, they could attract or release the resources existing in the group. This way, promoting sustainable development and existence would make them more effective and prolong their existence (Youtie et al. 2023; Lanhoso, Coelho 2021; Kahn 2018; Chick 2012). In this case, sustainability is equal to engagement, as it is one of the main focuses for a community to exist and be functional. As E. Manzini and D. Fassi mention, such communities 'not only live together but also realize the power of change together, not only through local institutions but also through the presence of informal groups together' (Fassi, Manzini 2022: 4). *Urban community* in such contexts becomes a functional group of people based on sustainable relationships and living in a city, who have come together to perform short-term or long-term actions for its benefit, which results in the formation of common group interests and an internal sense of belonging, which creates the identity of both – the group of people as a group and each person participating in it. However, this is still a more practical approach to define what is more of the seen than experienced reality. Here, we must understand the underlying epistemological traps – we define the patterned organism as machinery instead of trying to find the real essence of it.

An important perspective was established in a recent Fridzema et al. paper on scientific literature research, where the discourse of the meta-dimension of scientific literature was analysed (Fridzema et al. 2024). A clear pattern was found in the perspective of meta characteristics. Before the year 2000, most of it used the semantics of 'virtual', making it a new perception or a new world of our lives. It was virtuality versus reality. However, after 2000, different semantics arrived, saying more and more that all now become 'digital'. The trends are seen of everything becoming not real and not virtual; all is becoming digital. Moreover, this point of view now changes the perception of spatiality and timing. We no longer have the real and

the virtual worlds; these are now interconnected. The virtuality extends reality, and the reality extends virtuality. This idea does not seem new; M. McLuhan (1964) had already seen it earlier, trying to define all media as the extension of our body. This changes our perception of how the community can be treated today. When performing research, we should, at some level, extend our *urban community* object to the level of the meta world. In such a way, we would not lose an important dimension of research where the urban community becomes an extension of the city or vice versa.

The aforementioned change in perception and not just creating a profile in some social networks moves *urban communities* into a digital dimension. Digitality here shows the need to understand the networks the *urban community* creates and participates in. In this case, we again get to the years-old discussion that comes to J. Baudrillard – what is real and how the construction of our reality works: ‘Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal’ (Baudrillard 2002: 3). Hyperreality must be taken in advance when defining *urban communities*. Cities are no longer places based on physical reality. Cities are now networks that are simulacra of various concepts, and hyperreality nowadays is that concept of digitality. Capitals that form *habitus* of the city and of that city dweller, who belongs to the urban community ‘in fact, was never linked by a contract to the society that it dominates. It is a sorcery of social relations, it is a challenge to society, and it must be responded to as such’ (Baudrillard 2002: 12). When taking the *urban community* as a singularity, all these capitals become the array of simulated networks that are neither real, nor virtual because they all the time belong to both spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

When it comes to the perception of an urban community and participation in its practices, we need to consider what shapes its identity (i.e. cultural and social environment, political situation, and historical development). J. Baudrillard would state that ‘the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible’ (Baudrillard 2002: 15). It is important to understand, when researching urban environment and its processes, that the interconnectivity of all to all must be taken in as parametric selection criteria. This could lead to unexpected and more up-to-date results when researching the city. The *urban community* and its *habitus*, a complex and multilayered phenomenon, is a depth that we must delve into in trying to understand the urban environment and its directions, to comprehend what makes *urban identity* and what perspectives it gives to the overall *urban vision* of the place.

Received 31 December 2024

Accepted 14 February 2025

References

1. Arnstein, S. R. 2019. ‘A Ladder of Citizen Participation’, *Journal of the American Planning Association* 85(1): 24–34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2018.1559388>
2. Baudrillard, J. 2003. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
3. Betlej, A.; Kačerauskas, T. 2021. ‘Urban Creative Sustainability: The Case of Lublin’, *Sustainability* 13(17): 4072. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13074072>
4. Bourdieu, P.; Wacquant, L. J. D. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Brenner, N. 2009. ‘What is Critical Urban Theory?’, *City* 13(2–3): 198–207. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810902996466>

6. Busacca, M.; Paladini, R. 2022. 'Creativity and Social Capital: The Pillars of Venice's Success in the New European Bauhaus Programme', *Social Sciences* 11(12): 1–18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11120545>
7. Carpenter, J.; Horvath, C. 2022. 'Co-creation and the City: Arts-based Methods and Participatory Approaches in Urban Planning', *Urban Planning* 7(3): 311–314. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v7i3.6106>
8. Chick, A. 2012. 'Design for Social Innovation: Emerging Principles and Approaches', *Iridescent* 2(1): 78–90. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19235003.2012.11428505>
9. Fassi, D.; Manzini, E. 2022. 'Project-based Communities: Lessons Learned from Collaborative City-Making Experiences', *CoDesign* 18(1): 4–15. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2021.2001535>
10. Fridzema, N.; Aasman, S.; Slootweg, T.; Smit, R. 2024. 'Revolutionary Discourses from the Past: A Digital Hermeneutical Analysis of Widely Read Academic Publications on the Social Impact and Significance of the Internet', *Information, Communication & Society* 27(12): 2222–2241. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2420025>
11. Giddens, A. 2009. *Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
12. Florida, R.; Adler, P.; Mellander, C. 2017. 'The City as Innovation Machine', *Regional Studies* 9(2): 86–96. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2016.1255324>
13. Kahn, K. B. 2018. 'Understanding Innovation', *Business Horizons* 61: 453–460. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2018.01.011>
14. Kačerauskas, T. 2011. 'Miesto erdvės ir kultūros naratyvai [The Spaces of a City and the Cultural Narratives]', *Urbanistika ir architektūra* 35(2): 141–146. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3846/tpa.2011.16>
15. Kačerauskas, T. 2017. 'Philosophical Aspects of Urban Strangeness: The Case of Vilnius', *Studies in East European Thought* 69(2): 143–152. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-017-9282-0>
16. Kačerauskas, T. 2018. 'Urban (Un)sustainability: Cases of Vilnius's Informal and Illegal Settings', *Sustainability* 10(12): 4615. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10124615>
17. Kačerauskas, T. 2023. 'Filosofiniai architektūros kontekstai [Philosophical Contexts of Architecture]', *Logos* 117: 155–163. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24101/logos.2023.81>
18. Koning, J. I. J. C. D.; Crul, M. R. M.; Wever, R. 2016. 'Models of Co-creation', in *Proceedings of Fifth Service Design and Innovation Conference*, 266–278. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303541138>
19. Koning, J. I. J. C. D.; Puerari, E.; Mulder, I. J.; Loorbach, D. A. 2018. 'Design-enabled Participatory City Making', in *Proceedings of IEEE International Conference on Engineering, Technology, and Innovation (ICE/ITMC)*, 1–10. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19235003.2012.11428505>
20. Lanhoso, F.; Coelho, D. A. 2021. 'Emergence Fostered by Systemic Analysis – Seeding Innovation for Sustainable Development', *Sustainable Development* 29(4): 768–779. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2173>
21. Mansour, H. M.; Alves, F. B.; Costa, R. D. 2023. 'The Challenges in Understanding Urban Identity', *Porto Journal of Engineering* 9(2): 114–131. Available at: https://doi.org/10.24840/2183-6493_009-002_002207
22. Nefas, S. 2021. *Bendruomeniškumo sklaida Lietuvoje: monografija*. Vilnius: Mykolo Romerio universitetas.
23. Nefas, S. 2006. 'Funkcionalios vietos bendruomenė kaip pilietinės visuomenės pagrindas', *Viešoji politika ir administravimas* 17: 81–88.
24. Orchowska, J. 2024. 'Theorizing Urban Movements in Pierre Bourdieu's Terms – the Example of Warsaw, Poland', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 37: 59–75. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-022-09439-6>
25. Pajovič, U. 2022. 'The Future Belongs to Us: Crisis – Time to Regroup, Self-Management – Means to Reorganize', *Spool* 9(2): 77–90. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47982/spool.2022.2.06>
26. Pérez, Y.; Jayone, A. 2022. 'Deep Adaptive Reuse: A Response to the 21st-century Urban Challenges', *Spool* 9(2): 25–40. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47982/spool.2022.2.02>
27. Rosengren, M.; Polleter, F.; Sarkez-Knudsen, J.; Mameli, F. 2022. 'Urban Space and Everyday Adaptations. Rethinking Commons, Co-living, and Activism for the Anthropocene City', *Spool* 9(2): 5–23. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47982/spool.2022.2.01>
28. Sennett, R. 2012. *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. London: Yale University Press.

29. Youtie, J.; Ward, R.; Shapira, P.; Schillo, R. S.; Earl, L. E. 2023. 'Exploring New Approaches to Understanding Innovation Ecosystems', *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management* 35(3): 255–269. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09537325.2021.1972965>
30. Zwangsleitner, D.; Carnelli, E.; Boucsein, B.; Fettaoglu-Özgen, E.-S. 2022. 'It's too Late for Pessimism: How the Deep Adaptation Agenda is Relevant for Teaching in the Spatial Disciplines', *Spool* 9(2): 57–64. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47982/spool.2022.2.04>

VAIDAS JAKUTIS

Miesto bendruomenė postmodernaus miesto kontekste

Santrauka

Visuomenė kasdien susiduria su įvairiomis miesto gyvenimo problemomis – miestai tankėja, žaliosios erdvės ir miestiečiams skirtos poilsio zonos atsiduria politikos formuotojų prioritetų sąrašo apačioje, infrastruktūros sprendimai priimami verslo interesams tenkinti, o dėl klimato pokyčių miestuose gyventi kiekvieną vasarą tampa vis sunkiau. Kad suprastume, kaip visuomenė turėtų spręsti šiuos iššūkius, kad galėtų pakreipti urbanistinę plėtrą norima linkme, o tai leistų miesto gyventojams visapusiškai dalyvauti šiame daugiasluoksniame reiškinyje, turime iš esmės suprasti bendruomenių svarbą. Pagrindinė šio darbo tezė – urbanistinės krypties tyrimuose reikia kelti diskusiją, kas yra miesto bendruomenė ir kokių kritinių dimensijų santykyje ji formuoja miesto identitetą ir atvirkščiai, miestas formuoja jos. Siekiant paskatinti diskusiją, šiame straipsnyje pristatoma lyginamosios analizės metodu atlikta tarpdisciplininės mokslinės literatūros analizė kritinėms šiuolaikinės miesto bendruomenės dimensijoms išskirti.

Raktažodžiai: miesto bendruomenė, miesto identitetas, realybės suvokimas, skaitmena, virtualybė, urbanistiniai tinklai, habitus