



Off the beaten tracks: The neglected significance of interiority for sustainable urban development



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ABSTRACT

Interiority, the inner being, consciousness, is the core theme of this essay. My main concern is the application of rather marginal approaches to address future potentials for sustainable urban development variously referred to as holistic, integral, transdisciplinary or meta-theoretical. What characterizes them is an attempt to acknowledge many different types of knowledge, including what is typically called “Eastern” and “Western” approaches to science, culture, the arts and also perennial wisdom traditions. In spite of this apparent neglect, these approaches have been noticeably linked in the past to futures studies by several scholars. A key argument is that as much as we recognize the outer built environment of cities to address major challenges of our times like the ecological crisis, we also need to integrate the much more subtle interior dimensions of human existence to address them adequately. On the one hand, this research inquires about the potentials of social urban pioneers and change agents, intentional communities and such transnational initiatives like the transition town movement, which are discussed within the context of their global relevance in developed and developing countries illustrated by the case of India. While on the other hand, it is a quest to develop a conceptual-theoretical approach to what may be called integral transformative urban development planning.

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1. Introduction

“ . . . most people assume that there is some kind of conflict between *self-change* and *social change*, an approach traditionally associated with spirituality, and an approach traditionally associated with political action. Nothing could be further from the truth. For there is no way to change society save through my actions in the here and now of my being, of course with others, and designed to have whatever kind of social effect I could muster. But the only point of agency is myself, just as the only time in which I can act is now and the only place is here. But by the same token everything I do will affect all planes of social being and potentially everything in the universe.”

(Bhaskar 2012: lxxvii–lxxviii)

Thinking of cities we usually refer instantly to the built environment. Skyscrapers, wide axis roads, open squares, roads lined with shops, offices and residential buildings, maybe a park framed by buildings. Great cities in the past and the present are often those which impress us visually. To make it a living place, this tangible external dimension of cities, at second thought, is ripe with the intangibles of their culture and spirit. Interiority – emotions, aesthetics, values, worldviews,

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Fig. 1. Cityscape in Sidney, the interface of human beings and the built environment.
Source: author

intuition, and spirit, among others – makes the life of cities, as emphasized by [Jacobs \(1961\)](#) in her notion of the ‘street ballet’ and Louis Mumford’s ‘social urban drama’ ([Mumford, 1961](#)). It is this aspect, which is the underpinning theme and thesis of this essay, that not only must we recognize this kind of thinking, but also ultimately need to achieve an integrated balance of the material and immaterial dimensions of cities in order to create livable and sustainable cities in the future.

In this regard, it is essential to note that interiority cannot exist without its counterpart, exteriority. These aspects of being are inherently intermeshed in their co-existence and co-evolution. [Wilber \(2000\)](#) like no other has analyzed the reasons for the increasing neglect of interiority in modern times, especially in Western science and philosophy. And in turn, while doing so he traced the major thinkers and their streams of thought which support the recognition and importance of the interior. To [Wilber \(2000: 117\)](#), “interiority [. . .] is in its essence consciousness”,² underlining this once more by stating “[. . .] I will . . . take a more generalized position and simply say that, for me, the within of things is *consciousness*, the without of things is *form*” ([Wilber 2000: 117](#)). As we will see further below, although spirituality is an inextricable and unique part of human interiority, intrinsic to it is also a relational exterior dimension with an outreach to society. Based on integral theory, which attempts to integrate both the interior worlds of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity as well as the objective and inter-objective, systemic exterior worlds, these multiple dimensions and various types of spirituality are analyzed in great detail in Wilber’s book “Integral Spirituality” (2006) ([Fig. 1](#)).

If we are to address the issue of climate change by way of urban development planning, there is a need to stress the significance of the interior, non-visible, intangible dimensions of urban life in relation to their material consequences

² He maintains that others have used different wordings to express by and large the same phenomenon, e.g. prehension (Whitehead), cognition (Spinoza), perception (Leibnitz).

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