



Entering Urban Humanities: An Editorial

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Urban humanities is an emerging global practice and an evolving theme within the Institute for Urban Research (IUR) at Malmö University. This issue of *Urban Matters* reflects how researchers from various disciplines, as well as artists and community leaders, have interpreted urban humanities. The group was brought together through a joint reading of the book *Urban Humanities: New Practices for Reimagining the City* by Dana Cuff, Jonathan Jae-an Crisman, Maite Zubiaurre, Todd Samuel Presner, and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris. The readings were complemented by lectures from prominent scholars in urban history, memory studies, architectural studies, and related fields, but also artists and activists of urban art and movements.

As described by the Urban Humanities Initiative on its website, urban humanities connects urban studies with the humanities and design to create spaces where urban processes, situations, and social relations can be intensified, reflected upon, and reimagined—allowing the city to be learned anew in ways that actively involve its inhabitants and communities. It advocates learning about the city through co-designed interventions. We understand urban humanities as a form of public humanities: circulating insights from the humanities into civic matters, while also bringing new perspectives back. The principal aim of urban humanities is to intervene in and address urban issues, fostering a just urban environment and supporting its users in ethical and engaged ways.

As such, urban humanities fosters a scholarship that is inherently collaborative and always pedagogical. It therefore seemed natural that, in initiating urban humanities at the IUR, we should begin by opening a space where a diverse set of urban actors—from research, planning, art, and community organizing—could connect the ideas to their own practices, inspire interpretations, and perhaps collaboratively develop shared ones. In doing so, we sought to collectively address the questions: What will urban humanities help us achieve in Malmö (and beyond), and how will its application transform the field both conceptually and practically?

The book *Urban Humanities* introduced us to a field which transcends conventional temporal and spatial boundaries: the field examines the past, present, and future of a place and its people, while simultaneously challenging fixed notions of space and scale. Practitioners of urban humanities attend to interdependencies, flows, linkages, and conflicts that extend beyond the typical boundaries of cities, regions, or nation-states.

The action-oriented and situated practices proposed within urban humanities, as it is described in the book *Urban Humanities*, include thick mapping, spatial ethnography, and filmic sensing. Mapping has long been a shared concept across the humanities and social sciences. Many disciplines—from the humanities and social sciences to STEM—employ maps, adapting them to their particular aims. However, “thick mapping” in urban humanities is an aspiration in itself: it seeks to capture the multiplicity of spatial and social features of a place by incorporating diverse perspectives, methods, narratives, and sources. Thickness and thick description in particular comes from the Geertzian anthropological tradition developed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz back in the 1970s, who borrowed Ryle’s (1971) philosophical term in order to adjust it to ethnographic

research. Geertz (1973) proposed it as a method of ethnographic writing and analysis that goes beyond plain description, seeking to uncover the underlying meanings of human behavior by interpreting the context where it occurs (Ponterotto, 2006). Thickness is a defining quality of all the contributions included here, and a core attribute and ambition of urban humanities. We have strived for a thick understanding of the urban phenomena under consideration—an understanding that requires commitment, deep engagement, and sustained dialogue with place and people.

Spatial ethnography, practiced by some if not all our contributors, shares the thick/intense application of the methodology, where ethnographers immerse themselves in the field without imperializing it. Spatial ethnography is experienced with a commitment to the space and respect for the people involved, aiming to scrutinize and highlight the phenomena that the local population need communicated to the public. Therefore, it is part of a collective will and need, and not just an academic endeavor carried out for the benefit of the researcher.

The final practice—filmic sensing—is also included in this issue, taking advantage of the possibilities afforded by an online journal format. Filmic sensing is a sensory method and mode of communication that enhances both our own and our audience’s perception of the world through visual means and usually by filming a place/phenomenon. It offers a powerful tool for observing, analyzing, and even envisioning responses to urban issues.

Contemporary capitalism, neoliberal academia, and even the art world often leave little room for such thick experience and learning. There is too little time to immerse oneself in the field and gather the full spectrum of information, voices, hidden meanings, symbolisms, relationships, and conflicts that animate a given place. Likewise, we lack the time and institutional support to teach the importance of thick knowledge, as education increasingly becomes fast-paced and commodified. Urban humanities, by contrast, seeks to uphold the value of thickness at every stage of research, teaching, and even living—whether in scholarly or civic contexts. The essays in this issue accordingly resist the lure of fast, detached research and communication.

As members of the IUR-hosted book circle, we—together with the other participants—found “urban humanities” to be the perfect term for something we were already conducting in our research, artistic practices, and community organizing. The concept helped us recognize the connections between our practices, providing a shared language through which we could articulate our different starting points, contextual approaches, and ambitions. Beyond fostering connectivity, urban humanities also prompted us to consider the value of focusing on human experiences and expressions within the urban, ultimately leading us to reflect on the possible meanings of “the city” and on the kinds of materials and readings that can offer a view of it.

Inspired by reading and jointly discussing the book *Urban Humanities*, the authors have devoted time and care to gathering rich, layered insights into their cases and have chosen equally thoughtful, “thick” modes of conveying them. Many were themselves participants in the phenomena they studied, remaining in dialogue with diverse voices and concerns throughout. Others focused more closely on their own experiences or on the specific

contributions of their profession, activism, or discipline—and on how these are transformed through sustained engagement with the urban—presenting the multiple dimensions and complexities this entails.

Building on her work with, and in, the Oldpark Carnegie Library in North Belfast, historian [Sara Dybris McQuaid](#) shows how what she calls a “vernacular archive” can deepen our knowledge of urban history and re-engage us with concrete urban space—sometimes abstracted in analysis—by informing thick mapping. Visual artist [Marit Lindberg](#) contributes a video work created by the artist-driven collective *Tullverket*, of which she is a member. The piece vividly demonstrates how the practice of filmic sensing goes beyond documentary exposition, becoming a mode of perception that enriches and expands the Sorgenfri neighborhood of Malmö, where it was made. The photo essay by [Ellinor Portinsson](#), a specialist in outdoor environments for children’s and youth’s health and wellbeing with Växtvärket—a pioneering Malmö-based organization integrating design, education, and community involvement to create child-centered, sustainable, and inclusive public spaces—portrays how children grow and expand their subjectivity by shaping and transforming urban space through place-making. [Saba Moeini](#), an urban researcher with active engagement to urban life and movements in Malmö, in turn, engages essayistically with windows—not merely as architectural features, but as points of contact with the city and its contingent culture.

[Line Bjerg](#), Head of Collections and Research, Malmö Museum, reflects on the meaning of a city museum: whether it is about being in a city, collecting its activities over time, or becoming a meeting place where the contemporary city can manifest as a community. A historical approach to understanding the city as an identity is also taken by [Jonas Jarl](#), Artistic Director at CommunityKulturCentrum in Malmö, who recounts working with Malmö youths on a reinterpretation of *Kvarteret Korpen*, Bo Widerberg’s celebrated 1960s depiction of the city’s working-class life in the 1930s. The piece reflects solidarity as both a moral obligation and a drama of spatially mediated relationality, while also showing how the city materializes through historical dialogues and accommodations of past victories and failures—processes that may help in shaping a more humane urban present and future. Using examples from St. Louis, Missouri, literary scholar [Jason Finch](#) shows that techniques of literary interpretation can unlock urban texts not commonly read as literary, and that understanding a city’s literary field reveals dimensions inaccessible by other means—thus both expanding the literary field and enriching urban knowledge production and enabling us to comprehend complex relationships between cities’ pasts, presents, and futures in ways that remain generative of the future while being honest and knowledgeable about contested histories.

Rather than conveying a single message, the contributions to this issue of *Urban Matters* reveal the many potentialities that emerge when the humanities, urban studies, the arts, and ongoing urban struggles and community building are brought together. Collectively, they demonstrate how perspectives from humanities scholarship can both challenge and expand the understandings of cities and urban life offered by approaches more closely aligned with the social sciences. It has often been imagined that the social sciences produce theories and paradigms that, in various ways, facilitate progress, while the

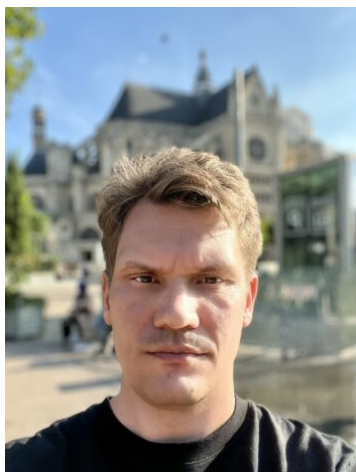
humanities are concerned with historical idiosyncrasies (Cuff et al., 2020; Paul 2023). Urban humanities recasts this relationship by showing how the humanities can make urban studies research more contextually and temporally aware—asking, for example, about the temporality of justice, or questioning the usefulness of utopias—and by slowing it down. These approaches are typically experimental, fundamentally collaborative, and—true to the spirit of urban humanities—speculatively oriented toward spatial justice. Both urban action and engaged scholarship or pedagogy can emerge from this approach, offering a lens through which to observe and contest injustices in cities.

This issue of *Urban Matters*, thus, suggests that it is through constant spatial practices that the humanities become worldly. As such, it marks only the first step toward expanding, sharing, and opening Urban Humanities activities to the people of Malmö and beyond.

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Robert Nilsson Mohammadi serves as the theme leader for urban humanities at Malmö University's Institute for Urban Research (IUR), where he coordinates the development of a research environment and hub dedicated to urban humanities.

His current work focuses on how local actors handle the afterlives of far-right racist attacks. By studying public memory art in various cities affected by far-right violence, his research introduces a spatialized, urbanized, and translocal perspective to memory work conducted by those impacted by such violence. He also approaches this topic through the framework of reparative remembering, investigating alternatives to dominant critical approaches and examining how cultural production and spatial practices can be reparative.

Another key research interest concerns participatory practices in the production of culture and knowledge in the public sphere. He approaches this both critically and creatively, analyzing the conditions for just co-production within an unequal society and a political economy that often reinforces the divide between those who contribute experiences and those who refine theories. A central concept in his work is "shared authority." He also studies community art and community archives as examples of participatory knowledge production in urban public spaces.



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Myrto Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Geography, University of the Aegean, Greece. She has studied at the Athens University of Economics (BSc) and Business and the National Technical University of Athens (MScs) and received her PhD in Urban and Regional Studies from Gran Sasso Science Institute, Italy. Her research interests are human and urban geography with a focus on housing, gender, and culture in the context of Southern European and Nordic countries. Previously, she was a postdoc at the Institute for Urban Research at Malmö University (2020–1) and an interdepartmental postdoc between Gender Studies (Tema G) and Visualization Studies (MIT) at Linköping University, Sweden (2022–5). Her publications have appeared in journals such as *Housing Studies*, *Social & Cultural Geography*, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *Critical Housing Analysis* etc. Her current work in the Labour Geography Research Lab focuses on the linkages between housing and labour precarity in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece.