

Research Paper

Radical imaginaries and new places for children in cities

Gregor H. MEWS, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

Antonio J. LARA-HERNADEZ, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Marcelo SBARRA, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

Abstract

Top-down urban visions, design competitions and manifestos have a long tradition of urban planning and design, unlocking desired discourse on imaginary urban futures such as regenerative cities. At the same time, we are living in a state of meta-crisis threatening the state of health at a planetary scale. As urbanisation continues to increase, cities could be part of the transformation process to enable regeneration and a return to planetary health. However, as cities are nested within complexities associated with cultural practices, policies, and making- processes, often such vision can lead to unintended outcomes and leave vulnerable population groups behind. In many cases, children, which are our future, are often overlooked. In this paper, we seek to speculate about a different way of imagining healthy cities by first introducing a speculative non-linear theoretical framework as our vision for cities, second applying the framework to three different international case studies to harness the transformational power of being in the city for children and engaging in everyday life observations related to children. In a sense, this is a radical departure from traditional visioning as we centre the visioning around ontological cuts from the existing conditions. Third, we conclude with a set of research questions as a targeted provocation to overcome the meta-crisis that seems so deeply caused by the human condition.

Keywords

Urban vision, speculative imaginaries, regenerative cities, children, everyday life, public space

1. Introduction

The human capacity for imagination has been part of urban visions since urban design and town planning evolved as a distinctive discipline. Deployed as a strategic tool to urban visions assist in informing political and policy decisions to improve the health of people living in urban conditions. Ebenezer Howard's Garden City (1965), the Chicago School with the top-down City Beautiful movement (Carlino & Saiz, 2008), and the rigid technocratic Charter of Athens (Corbusier & Eardley, 1973) are only some of the prominent early exemplars where visions for urbanity had long-lasting affects on the way we think, design and plan cities. However, the integration of such vision continues to develop in the second half of the 20th century, highlighting the role of the human dimension and experience in shaping environmental conditions. Jane Jacobs's (1961) famous critique of urban conditions in New York in the 1960s is conceived as an urgent call to value all user experiences as a core part of realising shared visions so that cities offer something to everyone. At the same time, Kevin Lynch (1960) asserted that people create mental maps based on core spatial elements that influence their experiences as well as Gordon Cullen (2012), with his concept of 'serial

vision', suggested integrating humans' visual perceptions. Now, our collective awareness has and continues to evolve and integrate factors such as regenerative design, meaningful community engagement such as participatory co-design, nature-based solutions, or novel technology framed under the conceptual umbrella of smart cities and even Artificial Intelligence (AI) now used to decentre human superiority thinking. Arguably, the New Urban Agenda (United Nations, 2017) linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is perhaps the most comprehensive normative policy vision to date, generating the canvas on how urban environments should be approached to achieve healthy, liveable, equitable and resilient urban environments for all. However, arguably, contemporary urban environments are made up of multitudes of complex assemblages that escape simplistic slogans and reductionist recommendations that have the intention to improve conditions but instead lead to new sets of challenges as 21st-century urbanity increasingly becomes more fragile, fragmented, and unjust (Clos, Sennett & Sassen, 2018). Since the global COVID-19 pandemic shook up our way of life, the health domain spearheaded by the World Health Organisation acknowledges the need for interdisciplinary collaboration at all scales (local, regional, national, global) required to attain not just the health for people but also animals and our environment, framed under the conceptual umbrella of One Health (WHO, 2017). For One Health to work it may benefit from highly nuanced, performative onto-epistemologies (Barad, 2003, 2007) that can reveal contradictions, ambiguities, hidden or lost experiences and possible perceptions that are closely entangled with the social and spatial-material worlds in the broadest sense.

For the purpose of this paper, we position ourselves with expansionist perspectives that can be associated with concepts such as non-duality, nonlinearity, emergence, intersectionality, more-than-human perspectives and relationality. Within such a position, pluriversal methodologies question our established development paradigm and allow us to reimagine much more free-flowing post-structural epistemologies (see Bathla, 2024). Compared to established methodologies, they will enable us to gain insights into diverse and highly nuanced social worlds (human and non-human). After all, there is very little time left before irreversible shifts at the planetary scale will set us further back regarding the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Bathla's (2024) outlines a range of pluriversal methodologies that in a sense lend themselves to One Health approach, but also challenge the following:

- Assumed neutrality of the researcher
- Privileges of verbal and textual methods
- Anthropocentrism
- Defiance of the pluriversal onto-epistemologies, what he called disembodiment and secular ontologies
- Participation and restitution of knowledge, and lastly
- Disowning of creative and imaginative possibilities of research.

In this sense, we seek to contribute to the closing of a research gap by first, introducing a novel speculative pluriversal imaginary research assemblage loop (SPIRAL) that functions as the conceptual frame to engage at the foundational level (radical) on how things come to be. Here, assemblage, as described by DeLanda (2016), shall be understood as a set of relations between objects (material or/and immaterial), which engage with external objects but, as Harman (2011, p. 19) elucidates, "is a real thing considered apart from any of its relations with other such things". Each object, therefore, is a real entity that does not rely on other objects or a fundamental ground of being but is grounded in its emergent reality (Howdysshell, 2020). Second, we test the research assemblage on three case studies related to children and health situated in three incommensurable spatial-material and socio-cultural contexts to enable new pathways to realise regenerative and healthy cities for all humans and nonhumans. Third, instead of providing a conclusion we

continue to think differently and offer a set of new questions that invites scholars and practitioners to collaborate with us and to further test the role of radical imaginaries, and urban health.

2. Speculative Pluriversal Imaginary Research Assemblage Loop (SPIRAL)

In the following section, we will introduce SPIRAL. While this explanation might be perceived as linear sequenced, it is necessary to stress that each element is ontologically grounded and connected in an ongoing and irreducible state of flow. Despite that we consider stories, narratives, politics, policies and materiality as part of our larger post-qualitative inquiry, they remain in constant flow and change their position to another. Therefore, we acknowledge that as with any conception of any idea conveyed in writing, limitations apply. To underpin the flow and loop state, each circle has a different colour and a dot associated with it that can be moved on any part between various of these elements, whilst ontology linked to the observer or reader (a social world) is always present. Combined SPIRAL is an imaginary research assemblage that operates as an entry point to reveal hidden aspects that exist in pluriversal words and their irreducible becoming.

2.1. Ontology (Mind/ Body/ Spirit)

The SPIRAL is a radical imaginary product itself and should be conceived as a conceptual tool to frame our line of inquiry, as the border has to be drawn somewhere. As this paper addresses urban health issues it is inspired by Hancock's (1985) Mandala of Health: A model of the human ecosystem that embraces circularity as a symbol of the universe and public health. Health, as such, is experienced as an individual (a social world) and, in his model, is comprised of body, mind, and spirit. Despite that, it is seen as the centre or focus but should not be viewed in isolation but rather in a flowing state of relationship to every other element in SPIRAL that is in motion (see Figure 1).

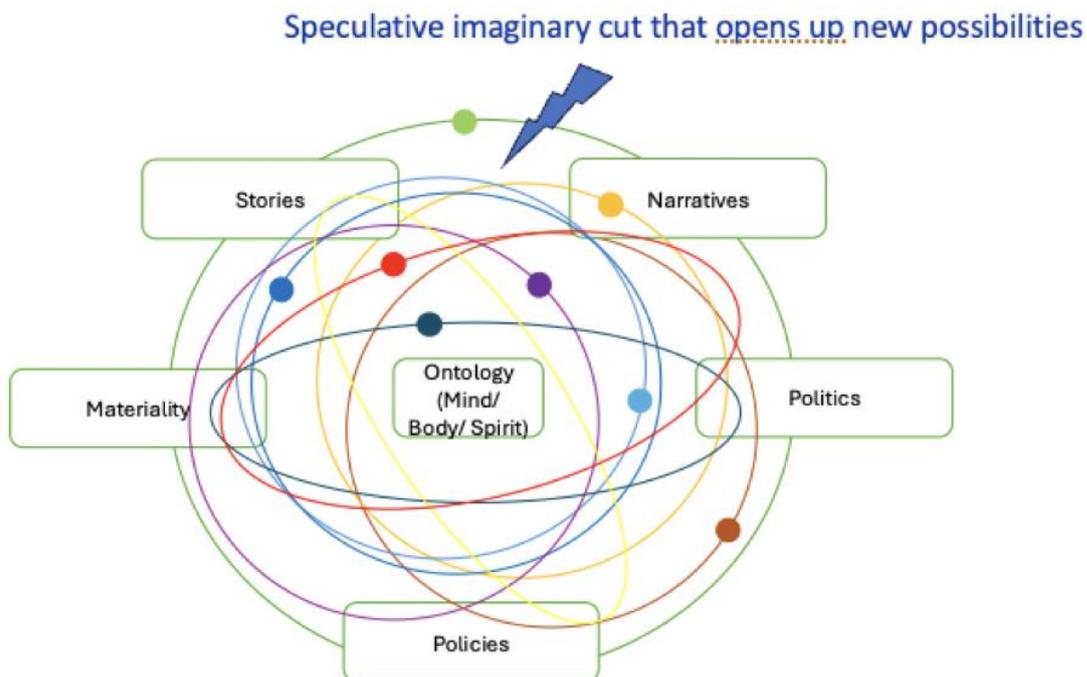


Figure 1. A visualisation of SPIRAL. Source: G. Mews.

2.2. Stories

The relationship between meaning-making and human experience, as well as perception of everyday life accounts, is proven within the wider transdisciplinary discourse (Joranger, 2023). In fact, stories are a universal cultural practice that carries rich insights that shape our understanding and communication about ourselves (a social world) and other people around us (other social worlds). Stories can be fully imagined or playfully simulated as products of the mind; however, in many respects, stories are situated between factual accounts of events that take place. Italo Calvino (1972, p.114) suggested in his book 'Invisible Cities' that *"Everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else."* Meaning and rich insights are produced and shared through stories with others around us. The stories we tell ourselves are situated within the ongoing process of social relations and, therefore, impact those around us in proximity. Here, proximity serves as the space of encounter that can be territorialised in a physical place or deterritorialised (non-physical), as discussed in depth by Deleuze and Guattari (1987/2021).

2.3. Narratives

Stories are part of larger narratives that surround us and shape our (social and cultural) existence. Narratives can serve diverse functions as part of everyday life and can include entertainment, education, which includes research and facts, cultural practices, identity formation to place, and sharing wisdom, values, and life lessons. For example, Proshansky made in 1978 the crucial link between place and individuals' identity. Subsequently, other scholars adopt the research theory and co-create a larger narrative. Such narratives are shared, meaning that they integrate plurality associated with the social worlds of others around us. Importantly, these narratives, if shared, can evolve into religions or ideologies as they provide the foundations of a shared understanding, fragmented insights into human existence, and moral values. An agreed shared view of the 'world', alignment of value systems, collective identities, and situated cultural rituals and spatial practices generate a sense of belonging to another and a place.

2.4. Politics

Under such conditions, narratives become political as tensions can arise between individuals' social works and the co-create social world based on the underlying narrative. For example, the urban anthropologist Setha Low's (1996, 2006) body of work on spatial politics of public space compelling demonstrates that narratives are closely tied to politics and consequently distribute power in unequal and dynamic ways that can easily remain hidden. Within our predominant modus operandi and governance frameworks, politics will inform policy to shape the ongoing process of how cities enable better conditions for all.

2.5. Policies

Especially when narrowing down this story about SPIRAL within the context of children, spatial politics and health, Gleeson and Sipe's (2006) work on Creating child-friendly cities as well and Freeman and Tranter's (2011) work *Children and their Urban Environment: Changing Worlds* capture the tone of its time making policy-relevant observations and suggestions. At the same, the more-than-human perspective remains less developed. Fortunately, Malone, Tesar and Arnd (2020) picked up where others left off and examined the *Posthuman Childhood conditions*, decentring human superiority thinking in relation to spatial-material practices.

2.6. Materiality

Materiality here is the totality of properties associated with the distinct nature of objects, substances, or phenomena that can be perceived or experienced through the senses. When policies are combined with

funding, a particular form of energy, imbued with action and materiality, is being shaped. In turn, that meaning people ascribe to materiality and place shapes the stories we create, tell and share with others. Urbanity or cities, as such, are potent playgrounds for the modification of materiality.

2.7. Speculative imaginary cut of SPIRAL

Within the SPIRAL framework, this is the part where urban visions are generated through speculative imaginary cuts that are symbolised through a blue flash (figure 1). This element allows us to escape the loop in which we can engage in speculation on endless, highly nuanced, performative, onto-epistemological urban visions. Such visions generate an abstract assemblage of infinite possibilities and open up different possible SPIRALs that, in turn, allow us to reimagine children in cities to harness their regenerative potential in pursuit of better health (human and non-human) (figure 2). As we embrace openness and non-duality, the cut can be placed between any of the elements present in the loop. However, the cuts cannot exist in isolation as they would otherwise remain intangible sense. The cut is relationally connected to a case study and the ontological perspective of the author and reader that meaning can be socialised. That socialisation is symbolised as the connecting loop between different visions highlighted in green in Figure 2.

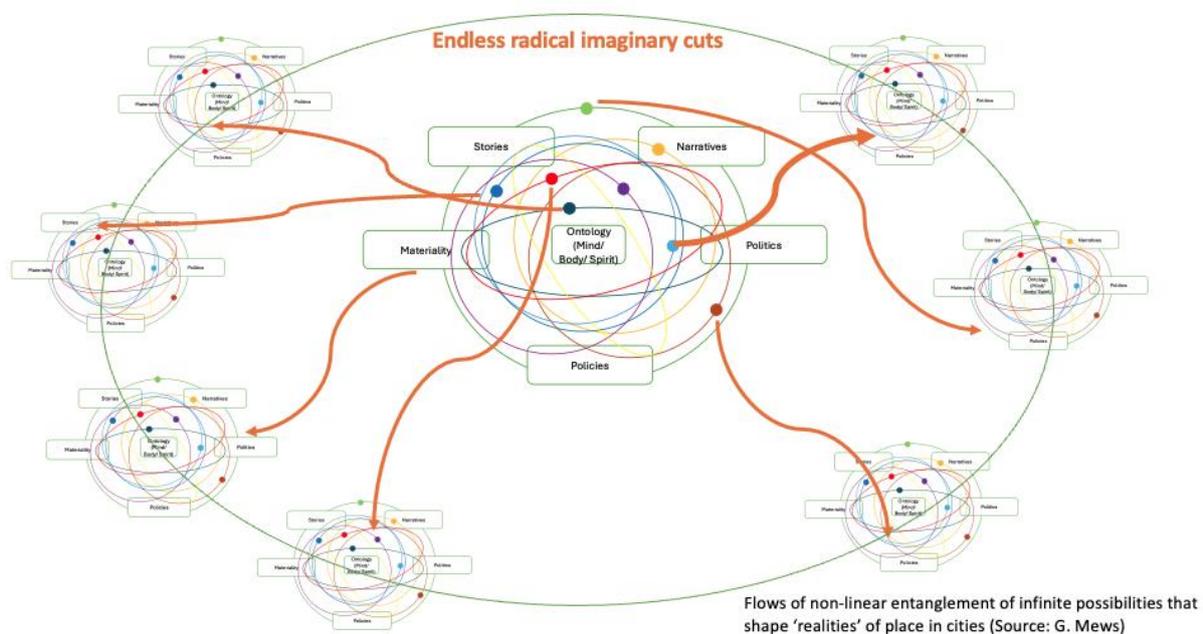


Figure 2. A visualisation of unlimited urban visioning in the SPIRAL. Source: G. Mews.

3. Case study Logan, Australia

To overcome abstract theoretical divisions of the SPIRAL framework and spatial practices, we are now testing the framework in three distinct socio-cultural contexts, starting with children in public spaces in Logan, Australia, Venice, Italy, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The first case study is situated in the city of Logan, Australia. Logan is a distinct local government area situated on the land of the Yugambah people, which is part of the larger metropolitan area of Brisbane, Meanjin. The suburb Woodridge is home to 12,530 people living on 4.67 square km, with 26 per cent of the population classified as children (3,011 children in the age range of 0-14) (.id 2021). The majority of the urban morphology is classified as suburban detached housing, segregated land use and an abundance of public space in the form of streets that predominantly cater for private vehicle use. As a cultural landscape, these are the conditions in which most children grow up and play across Australia (see Scharoun & Mews, 2018) and, therefore, serve well to test the SPIRAL approach.

Across Australia, over 16 percent of the population is under the age of 12, and an estimated 65 percent of parents do not feel confident in identifying signs of social and emotional challenges in their children (Australian Government 2021, p. 135). Subsequently, there is an urgent need to address health inequalities around opportunities to increase physical activity and enable a broad range of environmental experiences in neighbourhoods (Cochrane et al. 2019).

Kenny Street is a typical suburban neighbourhood street with road blockages at both street ends when the neighbourhood play activities take place. It is approximately 800 metres long with a one-metre-wide concrete footpath on the northern side of the street (figure 3). Kenny Street merges with Douglas Street towards the east with a sharp corner. Towards the west, the juncture is formalised through a T-juncture into Shannon Street with a wider sightline. A few trees provide partly shade onto parts of the footpath in fragments. While the street was blocked for motorised traffic, eight cars were parked on the verge around nine o'clock in the morning. A temporary fold-up tent had been erected, and a free BBQ was being set up.

A small table with toys and outdoor play materials had been made available to stimulate play activities. The political activism of Neighbourhood Play Networks in Logan aims to ensure children participate in locally designed activities and approaches that enable access to active play more often - ideally every day. The program stresses that children do not see separateness between spaces and places to play and the wider community (Logan Together 2020). To reverse the trend of social isolation and lack of play opportunities in public spaces, Logan Together initiated Kenny Street, a neighbourhood street play day, in which the street is closed through traffic and under the guidance of a community play champion, children can reclaim public space for social encounters as a place of belonging. Massey (2004) argues that spaces, such as Kenny Street, function as places that are inherently connected with culture, which in turn is carried into place through bodies. Here, bodies function as an animated and energised conduit, allowing us to experience a relational engagement with the world in dynamic and temporal ways and noting that children are not an inherent property of an individual or human but a dynamic body of different forces with the ability to (re)configure 'what is'. Children here frequently self-report a perceived increased level of physical activity and sense of connection in moments of outdoor play, treasuring these moments of joy together through play by being outside with friends (human and non-human). In addition, children reported physical safety concerns but again demonstrated sophisticated levels of self-awareness, indicating a level of competency that adults do not easily grant. Yet, despite the success, the initiative was not mainstreamed by the government or led to policy revisions.



Figure 3. Play in Kenny Street, Logan. Source: G. Mews.

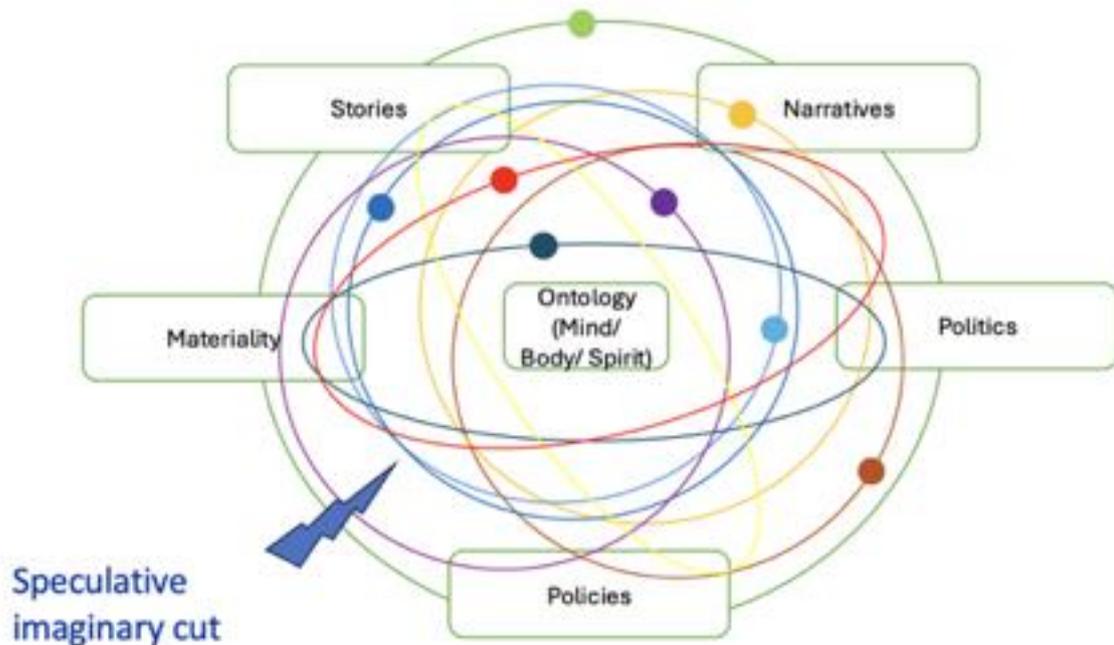


Figure 4. SPIRAL in Logan. Source: G. Mews.

The speculative cut in the SPIRAL supports a different type of urban vision for Logan and is inserted here between Policies and Materiality (Figure 4), in which local government authority holds agency to pass a new policy that actively breaks down the barriers and enables conditions in which every neighbourhood street in Woodridge is declared to be a play street. The German “Spielstrasse” concept functions as proof of concept and cultural transferability, which has been demonstrated with the Neighbourhood Play Project. This policy includes speed restrictions for vehicles around 7 km/h, an enforceable law that prioritises

children and their right to independent mobility at the neighbourhood network scale. In addition, the policy actively incorporates the intangible values of the community. These can improve the sense of stewardship and increase the level of care as well as the sense of belonging. Financial incentives and support allow residents to serve their community and their becoming through process-oriented place-making (figure 3). This may occur through a rich assemblage of artistic projects (figure 3), new flora (trees or food crops), and higher fauna diversity (chicken, bees etc.) which can be perceived as 'messy' or uncontrolled but adds a sense of awe and wonder to each street which a level of care is evident in the spatial-material practices not just of 3,011 children but all 12,530 residents. The policy is directed towards the regenerative potential of human and non-human health and their coexistence.

4. Case study Venice, Italy

Venice is a particular example in terms of urban design; it has two built environment characteristics that are strongly related to the SPIRAL, such as a human scale and a double fractal urban fabric (see Figure 5). Here, the human scale refers to the characteristic of the built environment that allows social interaction to occur in the urban sphere. It is well known that Venice is a worldwide tourist attraction; in fact, it is one of the cities most affected by over-tourism due to governmental political agenda.

This intricated urban fabric, in conjunction with the cultural landscape and policies regulating the use of public spaces (see Lara-Hernandez, 2023), lays the way for a fertile environment for emerging and contested narratives.



Figure 5. Venice is a double fractal city. Source: J.A. Lara-Hernandez (2023)

Not long ago the streets in Venice like many other medieval cities were the stage of urban everyday life. Currently, Venice's population is less than 50,000 and has been consistently declining from a peak of 175,000 in the 1970s, and its streets are mainly used for tourist transit. Furthermore, Tourism Services Index scores are positively associated with percentage values in demographic decline and unoccupied dwellings (Ignaccolo, C., Zheng, Y., & Williams, S., 2023). Venice is going through a process of depopulation and aging, as many others in European City Centres (Larraz and García-Gomez, 2020). If the population falls below 40,000, there is concern that Venice will cease to be a viable living city (Hosany, 2024).

Regarding children, on the one hand, the Venice Council encourages children to appropriate public spaces due to their unique, safe and peaceful ambience (Comune di Venezia, 2023). While on the other hand, the

use of public spaces in Venice is heavily regulated (Comune di Venezia, 2022). Moreover, some squares have been declared “off limits” for children by the Urban Police and Security Regulations of the Commune (Bon, 2019). By doing so, residents (children, too) are deprived of their right to use their city. Thus, we have contradictory policies enacted over the use of public spaces.

Nevertheless, the sense of community among the residents remains strong. We constantly claim their right to appropriate THEIR public spaces even in terms of crises (Lara-Hernandez, 2023). Furthermore, in many of the squares, there has been a renaissance of liveability in the sense that entire families gather and temporarily appropriate them for celebrating events (see Figures 6 and 7) as they have always been.



Figure 6. Children playing in San Giacomo del Oreo. Source: J. A. Lara-Hernandez.



Figure 7. Children painting in the square in San Jacomo dell Orio. Source: J.A. Lara-Hernandez.

Regarding children, Venice is what the pre-industrial city used to be—a place where parents are not the “drivers” of their children. There are no cars or any kind of vehicles, so children can just go out to gather, play, enjoy, and learn. They have freedom of movement, they can explore, and they can certainly appropriate public spaces.

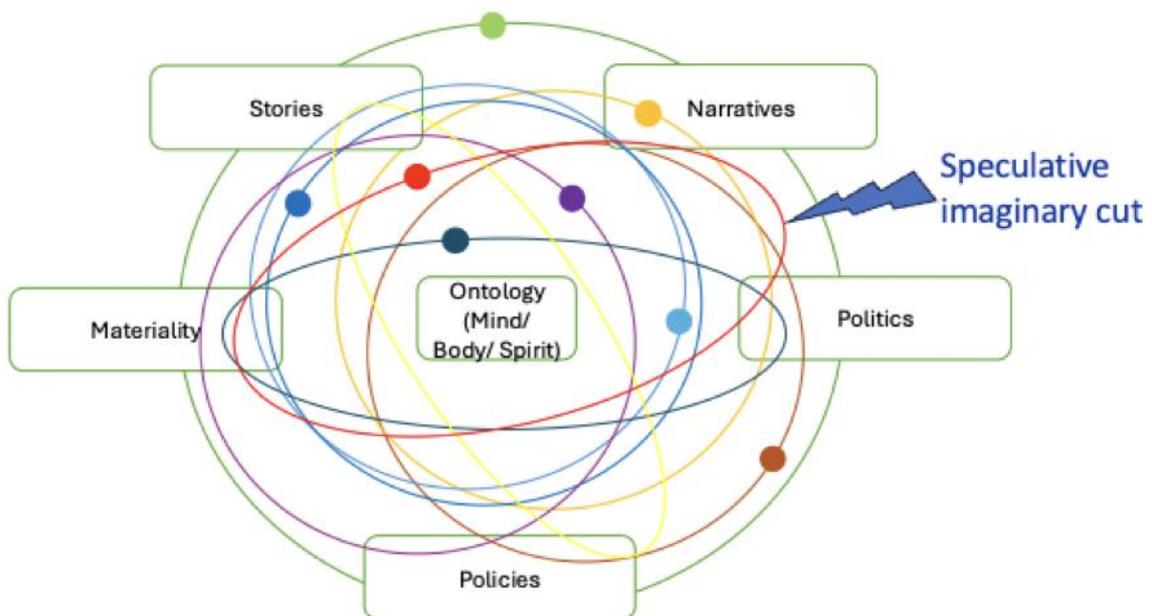


Figure 8. SPIRAL in Venice. Source: G. Mews.

Our speculative cut to support an alternative urban vision is inserted here between Narratives and Politics (Figure 8), in which residents, despite restrictive policies, actively re-appropriate public spaces, especially children. There are no cars or any kind of vehicles. Therefore, they can just go out to gather, play, enjoy and learn. They have freedom of movement; they can explore, and they can certainly temporarily appropriate public spaces. Furthermore, in terms of urban design, the city layout encourages social encounters in public spaces, which enhances a sense of community. These assemblages of material and immaterial practices attain culture and narratives which affect materiality and vice versa (Simmel, 1969). In such scenarios, the “customary law” could enact more power than the state law, creating alternative narratives. Utilising SPIRAL facilitates us to grasp such narratives that pave the way to politics and, subsequently, policies that are invisible to the foreign eye, affecting materiality.

6. Case Study Maré Slum, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The Maré Slum, also known as Favela de Maré in Portuguese, is made up of seventeen communities and is home to nearly 140,000 people. One of the communities, called Ramos, is situated along Guanabara Bay facing Rio de Janeiro International Airport (Galeão) and the University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Despite being the target of numerous government initiatives and political interests, Maré is still officially classified as a favela, although its residents view it as an urban neighbourhood. There is a lack of quality open spaces and greenery, as the area has very few trees. The construction of the Ramos Swimming Pool, also known as Ramos Carlos Roberto de Oliveria Dicoró Beach Environmental Park, was completed in 2001. The pool is now one of Rio's most significant social infrastructure projects, providing a public space for people of all ages (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Ramos Swimming Pool on a closed day. Source: Bombana, Turra & Polette, 2022.

As for the context, the spatial-material practice in the context of Maré is a product of a culture that normalises ever-deepening segregation within its structural DNA. The South Zone of the city, where the famous beaches of Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon are located, has an immaterial fence of protection dedicated to the residents of these neighbourhoods and to tourists (Iwata & Del Rio, 2004). Bus routes that used to directly connect areas such as Ramos to the beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema were

progressively cancelled to prevent residents from the outskirts from 'invading' the elite beaches on weekends. At the same time, the Pool became increasingly popular and phenomenally successful since a prominent TV soap opera features the Pool. Testimony to such fame is evidenced in the catchphrases and stories that resonate repeatedly across Rio. The Ramos Pool is a place and wonderful attraction for families from the outskirts and neighbourhoods as yet another success story of the 'Cidade Maravilhosa', meaning Marvelous City (Bombana, Turra & Polette, 2022). The large size of the beach and its easy access to all residents consistently attract with approximately 50,000 a high number of visitors on weekends (Figure 10). Within the government's pursuit to democratise public space, the beach remains up to date a beacon of hope within the urban landscape.



Figure 10. The Ramos Swimming Pool in a weekend. Source: Pinto, 2014.

The water body that fills the pool contains 30,000,000 litres of seawater over 27,000 square metres to simulate the material object of the beach as a place for all. The symbolic relation to power and memory erasure that Ramos Pool brings should not be underestimated (Sbarra, 2020). By creating an 'exclusive' beach for the peripheral population, the unspoken political discourse occasionally emerges in the print news - socially heated headlines that state that only 'black' residents of nearby favelas with little education use the pool. More recently, news noted that the water was contaminated by urine and faecal coliforms and even by sea animals that somehow came from Guanabara Bay, which is one of the most polluted areas with unbearable odours. At the same, the government denied such allegations. To summarise, what we see here is the appropriation of a place by people in pursuit of joy, seeking an escape from politisation, may it be environmental or social (Cendrero & Fischer, 1997). The photos of the place on weekends have remained the same for almost 25 years: crowded, water, sun, and many children and families (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Children playing in the Ramos Swimming Pool. Source: Pinto, 2014.

Street vendors sell snacks, drinks, and toys for children (Pinto, 2014). Within this narrative, it is possible to interrogate the politics of segregation further, but as far as the use by children is concerned, it can be celebrated as a giant amusement park. It is a place of imagination where people can create meaning through their own everyday stories, pretending to be on one of Rio's famous beaches that is equally celebrated through immaterial cultural heritages such as the song 'Girl from Ipanema' celebrating across all marketing instruments the city's natural beauty (Iwara & Del Rio, 2004).

When applying the SPIRAL and inserting a speculative cut between stories and narratives, it becomes apparent that stories feed into a larger narrative and social construction around Ramos Pools. The SPIRAL assists not just in capturing some of the material and immaterial relationality but also between objects that inherently connects us with our mind, body and spirit to places and formative experiences that matter. Such a process creates countless ontologies of diverse social realities or different ways of understanding the world, which in turn is shaped by narratives we encounter. The bodies that experience public spaces involve human and non-human actors such as water, sun and sand, making Ramos Pool a unique case study that carries authenticity about the human condition and social encounter as part of a larger urban assemblage (Latour, 1996, DeLanda, 2019). The narrative about places such as the Pool is essential in gaining a nuanced understanding of residents' experiences and socially produced segregation upheld by the elites' social realities. Such relationality creates a sort of parallel reality – an 'improved reality' (Habermas, 1990) or an 'alternative spatiality' (Sbarra, 2020)- that is only real to those who imbue it with meaning.

7. Final remarks

One SPIRAL and three case studies, each one inserting and exploring a different speculative cut into our creative research assemblage related to children and health situated in three incommensurable spatial-material and socio-cultural contexts. With the above, we demonstrated that the SPIRAL integrates theories and qualitative and quantitative research, but more so, it is a post-qualitative inquiry that assists in

determining the role of highly nuanced urban visions, allowing us to think differently. Such an approach harmonises and arguably reconciles with an assumed neutral stance of the researcher, moving beyond reliance on textual methods, anthropocentric views that defy pluriversal onto-epistemologies and the ways we take part in the restitution of knowledge and reintegrate much more consciously creative, nuanced and urban visions into our designer's toolkit to overcome some of the meta-crisis by realising the regenerative and healthy cities for all humans and nonhumans. Lastly, we wish to invite the reader to examine the following questions with us:

- How can the SPIRAL approach shape our broader discourse on regenerative and healthy cities?
- What constitutes a 'quality' place for children in cities in your cultural context from a creative, more-than-human perspective?
- What are the decisive emergent properties of actors (human and non-human) to generate compelling 'alternative realities' and shape materiality in pursuit of ONE health?

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