

REVIEW

## A review of “*The Symbiotic City*”

Stuiver, M. (Ed.). (2022). *The symbiotic city*. Wageningen University Press.

### Review Author

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Biological metaphors for urban life abound because cities are inherently complex and we need a vocabulary and grammar to describe them.

The term “symbiosis” has been used by biologists to describe biological relations between species that range from antagonism to mutualism. Yet, the word was never used in a neutral way and as it gained currency during the late 19th and 20th centuries it was coopted in different social and scientific debates to variously provide a counter to the conflict and competition of Darwinism and to support holism as part of the environmental movement.

“The Symbiotic City” therefore adds to this long conceptual history by providing a role for symbiosis in its turn to perform on the urban stage. The term symbiosis in this book refers to various relationships, but mostly those between people and nature, and how cities ought to provide a setting for the interaction between both. At first, this definition would appear to be similar to the concept of “Nature Based Solutions” (NBS) and the 2008 work of Dr Kathy Mackinnon and others in the biodiversity team at the World Bank who were able to frame nature in terms that a bank would understand: lower-costs, regulatory oversight and capital versus operational expenditures.

But a symbiotic city is meant to do more than a technocratic NBS-style solution. Not least, it does not share its neoliberal framing and following the line of a long intellectual development in biology, it champions mutualism and cooperation over antagonism and competition. According to the authors of this work, it is concerned to inspire dialogues between the social and natural sciences. It expands and re-energises the holism of naturalistic metaphors about the city. It leans on active scholarship in Science Technology Studies guiding the way towards how to include the more-than-human in urban planning. It seeks to provoke an urgent urban response to the challenges of the Anthropocene. Above all, it calls for a professional ethos in reaching a middle ground between the objective, scientifically informed rational human being and the human being as *Homo sapiens* — an exclusive product of ecology and evolution. This middle ground is based on the ability of humans to learn and as such may be of interest to those who educate for environmental action.

Therefore, if the term “symbiotic cities” is meant to perform on the urban stage it is certainly going to need a lot of costume changes. The multiplicity of different approaches is illustrated in Professor Marian Stuiver’s chapter on the symbiotic city. A call to embrace nature in all of its diversity, while including different people, seeking lower-cost NBS while breaking down barriers

between disciplines is always to be welcomed. However, from reading the chapter, I began to wonder whether parts of this task had not in fact been debated by generations of urban and landscape planners. For example, Frederick Law Olmsted would have understood nature as a “partner in human design efforts” for his design of Boston’s Emerald necklace just as any contemporary symbiotic urbanist would, even if he had not expressed it in those terms. Cannot all efforts at planning infrastructure, for example, the actions of Victorian engineers in 19th century London to build sewers, mediated as they are through stakeholders and decision-makers and thought about in terms of Victorian understandings of productive urban agriculture, be classed as early acts of symbiotic urbanism? Given this historical perspective I wondered what is really new here and considering the breadth whether the ambition is not too large.

Given the World Bank and latterly the EU involvement in technocratic NBS solutions and their derivants, the potential exists for “The Symbiotic City” to be seen alone as a European project. The majority of the authors of this slim volume are based in the Netherlands and take a Eurocentric perspective on urban relations. As such they do not address the areas where I think the symbiotic city idea has more potential: in cities of the Global South where urban development as conversion of natural to urban areas is occurring fastest and cities in post-colonial societies, where “inclusivity” as recognition of sovereignty is part of efforts at re-naturing the city.

Stuiver, the book’s editor, is head of Green Cities programme at Wageningen University and a scholar who is well placed to promote a new boundary-crossing concept following decades of international research at the cross-over of social and ecological systems, with a focus on food, green spaces and wind energy. She has assembled a team of excellent researchers to produce an edited volume that, like any edited volume, tends to result in a fragmented output. Overall, in some domains, especially conceptualising the links between agriculture and citizens, biodiversity and some areas of urban metabolism they show that the idea of the symbiotic city offers a good deal for environmental educators who wish to communicate an idea holistically to practitioners and demonstrate to them that resolving urban environmental challenges requires a wide scope of activity.

This is an attractively presented and lucidly written book. A highlight for me was the excellent cartoon-like illustrations by the artist Henk van Ruitenbeek that leaven the at-times dry and technical material within. Contrast for example, the image on the cover of sycamore seeds floating above the city, with futuristic visions of autogyros and drones flying above cities (cf. Frank Lloyd Wright, Uber and Amazon) to reflect on how much of a departure from the norm of planning this book is meant to achieve. The flaws are common to an edited book format which tend to not handle a complex concept like a symbiotic city in an elegant way. The result is a set of chapters that are in general more illustrative than explanatory.

“The Symbiotic City” has great potential to inspire people to do positive work. Imagine if primary school children could be taught to think about the city symbiotically, and then acted in accordance with that. Furthermore, there is something inherently interesting, if not satisfying about a good metaphor. And while we all need a language to talk across disciplinary boundaries and to capture the complexity of cities, I remain concerned that the fluid, multiple ideas of the symbiotic city will simply rest at that of an empty signifier (e.g. sustainability) or one that elides too easily with NBS, biophilic urbanism or other prior variants. The major challenge for concepts such as these is not conceptual richness or even acceptability among a small group of experts but legibility and simplicity among a large group of concerned citizens. “The Symbiotic City” in trying to cover all of its bases ultimately signals a direction rather than reaching an arrival.

## Author Biography

**Marco Amati** is an environmental scientist with a PhD in planning from the University of Tsukuba (Japan). He is the author of *The City and the Super-organism* (2021) and has edited three books *Urban green belts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2008); *Exhibitions and the Development of Modern Planning Culture* (2014) with Robert Freestone, and *Conflict and Change in Australia's Peri-Urban Landscapes* (2016) with Andrew Butt and Melissa Kennedy. He works at RMIT University where he teaches planning history and researches urban forests.