Urban History (2025), 1–10
doi:10.1017/S0963926825100333

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

SURVEY AND SPECULATION

Urban history as urgent work, an argument for disciplinary promiscuity

Samuel Grinsell

The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, London, UK
Email: samgrinsell@gmail.com

Abstract

This survey argues that urban historians should be engaging with the climate crisis as a driver of urgent research and the environmental humanities as a vibrant and growing gathering of different disciplines and approaches. This will enable urban historians to help address the most pressing issues of the twenty-first century. The survey identifies three areas in which urban-environmental historians might go further than existing work in the field: ambitious thinking; radical critique; and engagement with play or experimentation. Each of these is explored through existing scholarship, with reflections on the implications for the practice of urban history.

> What if all historians treated the work of history as necessary, urgent, all-hands-on-deck work instead of an elaborate game to figure out who is smartest.
>
> Emily Pawley (@emilypawley), twitter, 19 April 2023

> PROMISCUOUS, ADJ. AND ADV. (NEW DEFINITION)
>
> Pronunciation: Brit. /prəˈmɪskjʊəs/ , U.S. /prəˈmɪskjəwəs/ Plurality. Not excess or randomness, but openness to multiple connections, sometimes partial. But when combined, cultivated, and nurtured may constitute sufficiency or abundance.
>
> Kim TallBear, 'Love in the Promiscuous Style', substack, 15 February 2022

In the summer of 2023, even as we gathered in Leicester to discuss 50 years of *Urban History*, UK cities were sites of urgent confrontation. Daily slow marches by Just Stop Oil, demanding that the government live up to its climate commitments by cancelling all new fossil fuel extraction, were taking place in London. Streets dedicated to the movement of motor vehicles were obstructed by delicate human bodies; the police extended every power available to them in trying to discourage marches; motorists at times turned violent in their frustrations at the impediment; the media showed only limited interest; and the government sought to pass new laws against even such

restrained action. As so many times before, struggles for power played out on the street, through bodily relations and contested control of movement. Just Stop Oil themselves evoked the US civil rights movement and other historical precedents in justifying their non-violent direct action.

At a very different scale, cities and the urban have been evoked by scholars of planetary climate crises as key sites in the production of global warming and the mitigation of its effects.[1] Coastal cities stand at great risk from rising sea levels; rising temperatures are often at their worst in the concreted urban core; construction is one of the most emitting industries at a global scale.[2] In a subtler sense, the fossil-fuel hungry culture that drives emissions is often seen as essentially tied to the urban: the modern city developed hand-in-glove with industrialization; the consumer culture that drives mass production is a key feature of urban life; air, rail, road and water transportation centre around moving goods and people to, from and between urban hubs.[3] The waste produced by consumerism, especially plastics, can now be found in the remotest depths of the ocean; and while consumerism is certainly not exclusively urban it is often at its most overtly extensive in cities.[4] Some scholars argue that the city has become a planetary beast; or perhaps it is the planet that has become urban.[5] In either case, traces of the city are everywhere.

This urgency of urban thinking has a range of implications for the field of urban-environmental history. On the one hand, here is a great opportunity: the environmental significance of the urban and the place of various non-human actors in the making of human spaces could hardly be more topical. Urban planners, architects, city governments and communities are all trying to better understand these connections. To think about urban waste, cleanliness, energy or infrastructure (to name a few key points) demands an urban historical lens, for these systems generally have long histories that have advanced through alteration, improvement and maintenance as well as (or even more than) radical new making. So the past of such systems is often still with us as we plan how they can be improved, altered or replaced. The need for historical understanding in such contexts is plain. Unsurprisingly, given this, urban history attracts scholars from a range of disciplines, notably but by no means exclusively geography, planning and architecture, and so urban history events often include people who have never thought of themselves as doing urban history exactly,

[1]For example M. Williams *et al.*, 'Mutualistic cities of the near future', in J.A. Thomas (ed.), *Altered Earth: Getting the Anthropocene Right* (Cambridge, 2022), 232–58, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009042369.017.

[2]S. Hanson *et al.*, 'A global ranking of port cities with high exposure to climate extremes', *Climatic Change*, 104 (2011), 89–111, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-010-9977-4; I.D. Stewart and G. Mills, *The Urban Heat Island: A Guidebook* (Amsterdam, 2021); B. Calder and G.A. Bremner, 'Buildings and energy: architectural history in the climate emergency', *Journal of Architecture*, 26 (2021), 79–115, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2021.1891950.

[3]The modern city of industry *par excellence* is Manchester see T. Hulme, *After the Shock City: Urban Culture and the Making of Modern Citizenship*, Royal Historical Society Studies in History (Woodbridge, 2019); and M. Crinson, *Shock City: Image and Architecture in Industrial Manchester* (London, 2022); as Crinson points out, commerce is often associated with another iconic city of modernity, Paris; see W. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Paris Arcades – Pariser Passagen* (Berlin, 2012); for more on the general economic and social significance of cities, see R. Harris, *How Cities Matter*, Elements in Global Urban History (Cambridge, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108782432.

[4]On plastic waste, see D.K.A. Barnes *et al.*, 'Accumulation and fragmentation of plastic debris in global environments', *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, 364 (2009), 1985–98.

[5]N. Brenner and C. Schmid, 'Planetary urbanisation', in M. Gandy (ed.), *Urban Constellations* (Berlin, 2012), 11–13; C. Nightingale, *Earthopolis: A Biography of Our Urban Planet* (Cambridge, 2022).

and may not even be entirely sure what it is.[6] So, on the other hand, we might perhaps be concerned that our field has become so expansive that it stands in need of clearer edges. If anyone can wander in and get involved, some might ask, are we really sure that we have a field at all?

This diversity has been a feature of urban history since its inception, leading to fairly regular calls for more precise boundaries and a clearer set of shared commitments.[7] Rather than repeat these, I want to ask what might happen if we push in the other direction. What might a messier, less bounded urban history look like, and what new assemblages might flow from it? The growth of environmental humanities in recent decades, expanding from its sources in eco-criticism, philosophy and environmental history, has shown rich potential for new ways of thinking with environments and sharing environmental knowledge that urban history has played only a small part in, in spite of the importance of urban topics within this agenda.[8] Of course, I am not suggesting that urban historians have not considered the environment, or that environmental historians have not considered the city: a rich conversation between the two groups has been ongoing for decades.[9] These conversations have focused on approaches to history more than on plunging into the implications of the urban within the environmental humanities at large or the emerging interdisciplinary field of Anthropocene studies.[10] In this intervention, I want to play with some of the possible connections between the environmental humanities and urban history, taking broad conceptions of both. Nothing here is intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive.

I have included two epigraphs to guide our play, one from a historian about history and the other from a queer indigenous theorist concerning alternative modes of relationships. I share Emily Pawley's fear that at times the structures of scholarly

[6]In which case, we point them in the direction of S. Ewen, *What Is Urban History?* (Cambridge, 2016); on the intersection of urban and environmental history, see M. Vitz, *Globalizing Urban Environmental History*, Elements in Global Urban History (Cambridge, 2024), www.cambridge.org/core/elements/globalizing-urban-environmental-history/2501543AE5F0560D294B9ECE8B932C72.

[7]Such calls can be found in interventions as varied in their diagnostics and proposals as 'Editorial', *Urban History Yearbook*, 1 (1974), 3–10, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926800014851; R. Rodger, 'Urban history: prospect and retrospect', *Urban History*, 19 (1992), 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926800009603; L.H. Lees, 'The challenge of political change: urban history in the 1990s', *Urban History*, 21 (1994), 7–19, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926800010671.

[8]Compare R.S. Emmett and D.E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA, 2017), https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10629.001.0001; to S. Frioux, 'At a green crossroads: recent theses in urban environmental history in Europe and North America', *Urban History*, 39 (2012), 529–39.

[9]See, for example, W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York and London, 1992); M.V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, Creating the North American Landscape (Baltimore, 2000); M. Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); T.P. Barnard (ed.), *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore* (Singapore, 2014); D. Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta*, Studies in Environment and History (Cambridge, 2018); M. Thelle and M. Høghøj (eds.), *Environment, Agency, and Technology in Urban Life since c.1750: Technonatures in the Global North* (Cham, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-46954-1.

[10]Notable exceptions include: M. Barua, *Lively Cities: Reconfiguring Urban Ecology* (Minneapolis, 2023); D. Bhattacharyya, 'Papering over muddy histories: imperial logics of space in the Anthropocene', in A. Burton, R. Mawani and S. Frost (eds.) *Biocultural Empire: New Histories of Imperial Lifeworlds* (London, 2024), 199–213, https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/275709.

publication are designed more to enable systems of ranking, comparison and intellectual sparring than to foster productive ideas. And I find Kim TallBear's provocative re-framing of promiscuity as a potential route to sufficiency or abundance suggestive for thinking through how disciplines can relate while still maintaining their own distinctive identities and approaches.[11] In giving space to these voices here, I am not arguing that all limits should be thrown off, or that we should do away with our systems of rigour, but that we may need to hold ourselves to an ethics of openness and connection if we are to develop theories and methods fitted to our current moment. I hope that this survey can provide some stimulus to such work and perhaps highlight some connections across disciplinary boundaries.

Many works that emerge from the environmental humanities have vital connections to urban history that remain relatively underdeveloped. Anthropologist Anna Tsing traces mushrooms through a global network of practices and cultural meanings 'at the end of world', linking together a history rooted in and routed through urban/rural relations.[12] Literary scholar Jemma Deer's argument that the Anthropocene represents another epochal shock to the collective human psyche, after Copernicus, Darwin and Freud, should prompt us to think about the ways in which the production of a mass culture that can be shocked, transformed and changed is itself a process embedded within urban life in all its spinning complexities.[13] (This point stands whether we take this mass culture to be authentic or merely an illusion made by the technologies of mass production.) Environmental historian Timothy LeCain has argued that the insights of new materialism should change our thinking on what it is to be human, a claim which must also have implications for cities and urbanization.[14] Thinkers as varied as Zoe Todd, Eduardo Kohn, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Edwin Etieyibo have sought ways to write indigenous knowledges into our scholarly modes of understanding, but even this important work is often absorbed by predominantly urban audiences and discourses.[15] This is not necessarily because these scholars intend to speak to such audiences, but because of the ways scholarly publishing, media and discussion circulate through urban networks. When scholars

[11]There is a resonance here with K. Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London and New York, 2020).

[12]A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton and Oxford, 2015); for thinking roots and routes together, see P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (pbk edn, London and New York, 2022; orig. edn 1993).

[13]J. Deer, *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World* (London, 2021).

[14]T.J. LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past*, Studies in Environment and History (Cambridge, 2017); new materialism is a large field but see for example J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, 2010).

[15]Z. Todd, 'An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: "ontology" is just another word for colonialism', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29 (2016), 4–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124; and *idem*, 'Refracting colonialism in Canada: fish tales, text, and insistent public grief', in M.S. Jackson (ed.), *Coloniality, Ontology, and the Question of the Posthuman*, Routledge Research in New Postcolonialisms (Abingdon and New York, 2018), 131–46; E. Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, 2013); E. Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds*, Special Collections in Ethnographic Theory (Chicago, 2015); E. Etieyibo, 'Ubuntu, cosmopolitanism, and distribution of natural resources', *Philosophical Papers*, 46 (2017), 139–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2017.1295616; these authors are not necessarily operating within the environmental humanities in the conventional sense, but they certainly share an agenda; for more, see Jackson (ed.), *Coloniality, Ontology, and the Question of the Posthuman*; and compare to V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York, 1993).

in the environmental humanities and allied fields call for changes in human ways of life and knowledge production, it is most often (explicitly or implicitly) urban life and culture that is called upon to change, to learn, to remake itself into something more mutualist and relational.[16] To be the crucible of the future.

An urban history that takes up these wider connections might develop in multiple directions, but I would be especially interested in promoting the following three specific moves. I do not propose these in an exclusive sense, as this instead of something else, but in an additive sense, this as well as all of the other things. I do not propose to reduce or attack any current ways of working, all of which are under quite enough threat from austerity budgets and anti-intellectualism without help from me or other scholars in general. Nor am I suggesting that there is not existing work that engages in some of what I am proposing here. The first of the three points that follow, in particular, is quite embedded in some existing work already. The other two are somewhat more speculative, intended as provocations to new work, but there are certainly examples of these as well.

First, the environmental humanities and associated scholarly moves encourage us to think about big questions of existence and how we live with one another within human and more-than-human communities.[17] The place of the urban within this (along with the entangled terms rural, suburban, periurban etc.), both in terms of individual sites and also of urban processes, is a vital area of study. We should be prepared not only to conduct empirical work within this agenda but also to expand our arguments to larger interventions in the grand debates of what it is to make the environments in which we live.

Proponents of the large in historical method – be this scale of data, geography or time – have made strong cases for versions of history that embrace this bigness to drive cultural and political agendas. This is not a new call: one can think of Jo Guldi and David Armitage's *History Manifesto* or Daniel Lord Smail's work on deep history, the former arguing for (among other things) an embrace of big data and the latter for a recognition of how the long expanses of time before the invention of writing shape history.[18] Dipesh Chakrabarty, building on the concept of the Anthropocene, has argued that historians need to think at the species level.[19] While most work that happens in university history departments remains restricted to relatively short spans of time and place, and most works that appear in the Urban History

[16]Of course, there is something of R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1985), in the idea that the rural and other such non-urban places are transformed into sites that speak to the urban, often through thinkers who are themselves urban or who, at least at times, leave their place in the non-urban in order to better speak to the urban.

[17]On the concept of the more-than-human for historians, see E. O'Gorman and A. Gaynor, 'More-than-human histories', *Environmental History*, 25 (2020), 711–35, https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emaa027; for environmental humanities thinking big thoughts, see, for example, B. Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, 2017); K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC, 2006); A.L. Tsing *et al.* (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis and London, 2017); K. TallBear, 'Caretaking relations, not American dreaming', *Kalfou*, 6 (2019), 24–41.

[18]J. Guldi and D. Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014); A. Shryock and D.L. Smail, *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520949669; this built on the earlier work: D.L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, 2008).

[19]D. Chakrabarty, 'The climate of history: four theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), 197–222, https://doi.org/10.1086/596640.

Bibliography are studies of relatively specific places, there are scholars seeking to take up this challenge in thinking through urban history as a totality. Most notably, Carl Nightingale has presented his biography of the only urban planet, *Earthopolis*.[20] In this book, he ranges across thousands of years of human history and cities to tease out the distinctive possibilities and challenges of urban life. Nightingale weaves together an account of grand trends in human settlements with specific stories, sites and sources. These sorts of projects, operating across dizzying spans of space and time, can perhaps open up ways of thinking of our lives as connected to the urban multitudes of the past and future, but the challenge is not to end up so far from historical sources that we struggle to locate ourselves. At its best, scholarship at scale can move smoothly between the specific and the general, and so should prompt those of us working on more specific studies to think boldly about how our case can address the big ideas of the discipline. A historian like Debjani Bhattacharyya, in her work on the Bengal Delta, is addressing urgent questions of how a city is made and how that process has been forgotten and covered over.[21] Her study is, at the same time, also an analysis of specific sources and sites that is closer to conventional ideas of the historical monograph.

To think big, as Bhattacharyya's book shows, does not mean to lose sight of the specific, and in urging urban historians to consider grand questions I am not suggesting that we must always leave behind our archives and places. Indeed, a close attention to archives and the making of urban histories can lead us to clearly located histories that in their specificity address larger questions, such as the queer practices of self and community building examined by Gregory Samantha Rosenthal or the significance of New York City as a hotbed of radical politics in Julie A. Gallagher's work.[22] One element of all this that deserves more attention is the more-than-human in the urban: we know that horses, pigs, dogs, cats, etc. have played interesting roles in the human making of space, but perhaps urban historians have paid insufficient attention to how the city environment has also driven changes in animal life. For foxes, pigeons, rats, monkeys, cats (again, but now thinking of them as wild creatures in many cities) and others, the urban has been a site of concentration and innovation in parallel to the concentration and innovation experienced by humans. I am thinking here of Catherine Oliver's sociological work on badgers, foxes and parakeets in the contemporary city and on chickens as products of the Anthropocene.[23] An account of the city that assumes only humans benefit from it misses a key aspect of the urban variable in the history of life on Earth. Moreover, the specifics of the more-than-human assemblages of different places vary a great deal and so pursuing them more extensively would help us develop more variegated visions of the planetary urban.

[20]Nightingale, *Earthopolis*.

[21]Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta*.

[22]G.S. Rosenthal, *Living Queer History: Remembrance and Belonging in a Southern City* (Chapel Hill, 2021); J.A. Gallagher, *Black Women and Politics in New York City*, Women in American History (Urbana, 2012).

[23]C. Oliver, 'Transforming paradise: neoliberal regeneration and more-than-human urbanism in Birmingham', *Urban Studies*, 60 (2023), 519–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221104975; and *idem*, 'The opposite of extinction', *Environment and History*, 28 (2022), 197–202, https://doi.org/10.3197/096734022X16470180631406.

Second, the environmental humanities have embraced a rich critical tradition of (among other strands) feminist, postcolonial, queer and indigenous thought that has positioned it as fundamentally against many of the dominant modes of late capitalist thought and management.[24] Urban history, while it certainly has its radical elements, has not generally adopted this self-consciously world-changing attitude. As the ecologies of the planet unravel around us, we should be asking ourselves: what kinds of urban history could fit this moment?[25] Perhaps I mean something stronger than this: what new urban histories could contribute to fruitful transformation in these times?

Scholars coming to the environmental humanities from literary theory, situating their work within the tradition of eco-critism from which in some senses the environmental humanities began, are often explicit in setting out ways of thinking that may help develop new modes of relating to one another. In *Radical Animism*, Jemma Deer argues that the Anthropocene should be understood as one of the great shocks to have threatened the stability of our ideas of the human.[26] In this of course she is aligned with other authors mentioned above. But within the traditions of eco-criticism she is able to push this insight to a new reading of established texts, indeed to a new reading of texts in general. For many historians, newness is claimed by reading new sources, or bringing together sets of sources that are generally kept separate; to read existing sources in a new way is often part of our work but it is not where we tend to put the focus when we design projects or claim that we are innovating. We feel safer saying that our findings come from some unexpected direction, that a new arrangement of our expansive evidence has shown new patterns, previously obscured. I am urging us to turn the critical eye of the environmental humanities scholar towards not only new sources or sets of sources but to the core collections on which our central ideas are based.

Developing these new readings may take thoughtful engagement with environmental humanities literature. For example, I would suggest that whereas Deer gives us a way to bring environmental readings to literature, there is a much wider sense in which reading as a process is important for tracing environmental relations. The anthropologist Eduardo Kohn has argued that indigenous modes of relationality alert us to the communicational features of the world, by which he means how one thing signals another: if this plant grows here it says something about the soil; the crack of a branch means that something is about to fall; if you show a jaguar your face it will understand that you are a fellow hunter rather than prey.[27] Reading is central for Kohn as a way of understanding the world around us, not in the sense of reading human texts to uncover how they represent the world, but in the sense of approaching the world as a set of communicative relations which we can read in the sense of

[24]This has been presented as one sense in which scholarship might be fit for the end of the world in Deer, *Radical Animism*; whether the environmental humanities always lives up to this has been questioned many times, for example, Todd, 'An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn'; for a wider discussion in relation to indigenous and decolonial thought, see Jackson, *Coloniality, Ontology, and the Question of the Posthuman*.

[25]As examples of first steps towards this, I would mention Gandy, *The Fabric of Space*; Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta*; Nightingale, *Earthopolis*.

[26]Deer, *Radical Animism*.

[27]Kohn, *How Forests Think*; on relational thinking, see P. Rawes (ed.), *Relational Architectural Ecologies: Architecture, Nature and Subjectivity* (London, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926825100333 Published online by Cambridge University Press

perceive and respond to. What I want to suggest by bringing Deer and Kohn together is that these two modes of reading both have significance for urban historians and may be productive in pushing our field further. Thinking with Deer can help us approach (for example) architecture, urban planning and design and the spaces these produce as active statements about human beliefs regarding our environment and how it should be shaped. These products are part of the same broad sphere of cultural action as the texts Deer studies and our analyses may show discourses in line with her work or which depart from it. We might, as historians often do, find ourselves arguing for more nuanced and differentiated accounts of these broad cultural changes, as we find that the sources we use reveal more in the way of tension and contestation than smooth progression. Thinking with Kohn, on the other hand, may turn us towards material relations as themselves a mode of interaction: we might think of how the form of London articulates something about the waters of the Thames or how the glittering lights of Las Vegas are explicitly in contrast with the darkness of the surrounding desert. Here, I am urging something less to do with what we think urban history can contribute to grand discussions and more to do with how we actually practise it. If we approach our sites and sources as lively, engaged interventions in a world of material relations, then perhaps we have one mode in which the specific might be able to effectively address the general. We will also have lowered the endeavour of city-making to an earthly activity, that is to say, we will be pushing back against the sublime vision of human mastery of nature that is so difficult to shake off in understanding the human built environment, whether it is urban or otherwise.[28]

Third, following on from both of the above, I would urge a deep and playful engagement with writing and the many other ways in which we can present our research. Environmental humanities thinkers push the boundaries not only of knowledge but also of the language through which it is expressed and there is something for urban historians to learn from in this.[29] We know that literary encounters with the city often spark new forms or styles of writing; there is no reason for urban historians to only produce texts that fit within the prescribed manner of public policy statements, news reporting or academic journals. I would love to read more urban history in which the experience of reading, as well as the content, was exciting, daring and provocative.

I am thinking here both of experiments with different media and of experiments in form or content or ways of making existing media. One example of a new media project is the online book/website *Feral Atlas*, a potent multimedia exploration of pollution in contemporary environments curated by the anthropologists Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger and Alder Keleman Saxena and the designer Feifei Zhou.[30] By clicking on species' names, the visitor opens up one of a selection of visualizations of different kinds of contemporary landscape, titled Invasion, Empire, Capital and

[28]On this issue in a decidedly non-urban setting, see W. Cronon, 'The trouble with wilderness; or, getting back to the wrong nature', *Environmental History*, 1 (1996), 7–28, https://doi.org/10.2307/3985059.

[29]For example, see D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Experimental Future (Durham, NC, 2016); *idem*, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis, 2016); K. Barad, 'Diffracting diffraction: cutting together-apart', *Parallax*, 20 (2014), 168–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.927623; Deer, *Radical Animism*; T. Morton and D. Boyer, *hyposubjects: on becoming human*, CCC2 Irreversibility (London, 2021); C. Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham NC, 2016).

[30]A.L. Tsing *et al.*, *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene* (Redwood City, 2020), https://doi.org/10.21627/2020fa.

Acceleration. None of these views is solely urban but all involve urban and infrastructural sites, structures and circulations. These different modes of looking emphasize different sets of ecological relations and entanglement, through writing, video works and drawing. The project is effective in making tangible the work of scholars who have focused on webs of connections; this point holds whether we prefer to think of these as a kind of ecology, as planetary urbanization, as a technosphere or any similar term. The connections are brought to the fore however we prefer to label them. The way this website uses text is also interesting, as it acts as a portal to works from a huge range of writers thinking in various different ways. Perhaps this site goes some way to producing the sort of multivocal discourse that we often claim is characteristic of the city, with its distinctive concentrations of strangers.

In terms of experiments in ways of working, where the process is the thing changed and the evolution of the output follows this, I would point to experiments in co-writing such as Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer's *hyposubjects.*[31] This theoretical text was written by the authors over online conversations, and retains the improvisatory style of everyday talk, with rushes and lulls and shared sentence construction and interruptions left in the text, but neither papered over to appear smooth nor emphasized so as to make the transition between speakers clear. The text is presented as a single thread in the same way in which we might listen to people in a relationship share the telling of a story.[32] There is an 'I', but it is never made explicit which author this refers to in any given case, although it is apparent that it is sometimes one and sometimes the other. One reads things such as: 'But then, just to summarize, it's actually also a way station on a path to something quite different. A dialectical image, isn't it? It is.'[33] The outcome is a text that itself invites contradiction and interruption, that remains more open than conventional scholarly works and which perhaps has more use as a prompt to thought than as a repository of thought in itself.

Not every experiment is a collaboration: Mel Y. Chen opens *Intoxications* with the words 'This is a strange book; welcome.'[34] What follows is a transdisciplinary exploration of how ideas of race and disability were (or are) co-produced through empire; the book concerns both toxic discourses and chemical toxins. Chen calls for modes of unlearning to open new possibilities for the future. Knowledge production is a serious business, but so is play; and playful modes of work may give us space to develop ideas, connections and ways of doing things that we did not previously think would be possible. In short, urban historians perhaps need to find their places to play and loosen up from some of the rigour of certain publication modes. In proposing this, I am consciously pushing back against the notion that the hard sciences or social sciences should be taken as models of what research should look like, and asserting that it can sometimes look like play. This involves drawing on the already existing multiplicity of publication venues, from scholarly journals and book publishers to public websites, apps and exhibitions. Although urban historians already engage

[31]Morton and Boyer, *hyposubjects.*

[32]C.B Harris *et al.*, 'Couples as socially distributed cognitive systems: remembering in everyday social and material contexts', *Memory Studies*, 7 (2014): 285–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698014530619.

[33]Morton and Boyer, *hyposubjects*, 55.

[34]M.Y. Chen, *Intoxicated: Race, Disability, and Chemical Intimacy across Empire*, Anima: Critical Race Studies Otherwise (Durham, NC, 2023), 1.

extensively with these, I am arguing for bolder uses of these media aiming for more radical engagement with our collective making of the urban.[35]

Our work, from here in planetary crisis, has only become more urgent. But I think that urgency places new demands of openness on us; it is not enough to tend only to our own garden, we must find our allies where we can, and build together new thoughts and hopes and stories concerning the urban history of our shared planetary condition. Because we (meaning all of us, not only urban historians) do not yet know how to build the post-fossil-fuel society. So far, we have been playing at doing so, but our play must be in earnest. While Just Stop Oil and other protest movements contest power on our streets, urban historians must ask ourselves how we are contesting the historical narratives of the powerful about our streets. Our era demands an urban history that is expansive in its connections and transformational in its intents, geared towards developing tools for liberation from technocratic governance rather than analyses for such modes of governance to use. We need a radical urban history that addresses the roots of our multiple cultural and material crises and the routes to alternative ways of growing, living and building together.

In short, we should approach our work as urgent and look promiscuously for allies where they can be found. We should combine, cultivate and nurture multiple ways of thinking historically about the urban and the environment. I want us to hold open the door to a promiscuous urban history of abundance; to a deepening of connections with allies from across fields and institutional settings; to forms of public engagement that place history at the centre of the vital renewal of public discourse and new models of collective relations. We should ask ourselves how we can be a way station on a path to something different. We do not have time for anything less.

Acknowledgments. I wish to thank Andrew McTominey for organizing the roundtable 'The past, present and future of urban-environmental history' for the conference 50 Years of the Urban History Journal (University of Leicester, 2023), at which I first presented an early version of this survey. Further thanks to fellow panellists, and to all those who attended. Since the event, much of the thinking behind this article has been sharpened through conversations with Peg Rawes and all of the students on Materialist Ecological Architectures at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. The article was further revised following the constructive comments of one anonymous reviewer, who in particular led me to additional readings in radical urban history. Finally I wish to thank Emily Pawley and Kim TallBear for granting permission to quote them as the epigraphs to this article.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

[35]This might go so far as performances, such as R. Wilson, N. Green, and I. Chambers, *Brutalism in Sound: Multi-Media Performance at Iklectik, London*, 13 Nov. 2021, https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10138862; see also B. Campkin and G. Duijzings (eds.), *Engaged Urbanism: Cities & Methodologies* (London, 2020), https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350986251.

Cite this article: Grinsell, S. (2025). Urban history as urgent work, an argument for disciplinary promiscuity. *Urban History*, 1–10, doi:10.1017/S0963926825100333