

# Chapter 15

## Afterword: Reading the Book Through the Lens of ‘Bildung’



Stephen Dobson

This book seeks multiple kinds of reader who are willing to adopt multiple optics as they learn cities. It brings together those interested in teaching, activism, research and consumerism and those forming or cocreating their own identities in a multisensorial, multimodal manner. In short it speaks to those interested in *bildung*, that is, identity formation, as a richly woven tapestry of city experiences. In reflecting on its contents, I posed questions as guides to a discussion of the issues that emerge from author’s explorations.

*If learning cities is ‘bildung’, haven’t the authors sought to communicate the desirability of bildung? Have they sought to show the potential of bildung, more so than as a project of dystopia where we are destined to become anonymous cogs in an urban machine?*

The word *bildung* is notoriously difficult to translate into English. If it is translated as ‘education’, as it sometimes is, it has too institutional a connotation. If translated as ‘upbringing’, it is too quickly associated with children and in so doing excludes adults. *Bildung* understood as an eighteenth century Enlightenment project sounds too philosophical and recalls spokespeople, often men, for this movement, such as Voltaire. Sometimes it is translated as ‘identity formation’ or more correctly ‘identity self-formation’; but these terms sound so cumbersome that some simply use the term ‘cultivation’ which evokes an ever-broadening civilising process which occurs as manners are refined, and there is a gradual emergence of new kinds of social codes and accompanying restrictions in cities (Elias 1978). Alternatively, *bildung* can be understood in a narrow sense and associated with so-called high culture such as classical music, art and opera. So, what does it mean in German and why might

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S. Dobson (✉)  
School of Education, University of South Australia, Magill, SA, Australia  
e-mail: [Stephen.dobson@unisa.edu.au](mailto:Stephen.dobson@unisa.edu.au)

it be so important to have an understanding of it in a book exploring how to learn cities?

As Guess (1996) has noted,

Bildung is not to be confused with building: Bildung comes from Bild (sign, image) and so means the process of imposing an image or form on something, or the results of such a process, whereas 'build' comes from a completely different Indo-European root having to do with 'dwelling.' (p. 153)

It can refer therefore to the process and the product whereby an image is not only imposed, but taken into oneself, through a process of imitation or imprinting. (Steinsholt 2011) But it can be more than an image in the strict sense of the term, and can be interaction with another person(s), sensory experiences of cities, a moment or a string of moments over months or years. The interaction could be passing the same street corner on a daily basis, reading a novel in a city cafe, listening to music on your personal device as you move through city spaces and so on. As conceived by McFarlane (2011), a geographer who has explored Mumbai and São Paulo, learning cities entails understanding how they are assemblages of tactile experiences, at once intimate and felt.

*If bildung is understood as the development of self-identity through the cultivation of both rational thought and the senses, is it not central to the work of each of the authors in their respective chapters?*

It might appear that the authors are intoxicated by the city images they conjure up in words, photographs and through their senses. In Walter Benjamin's list of urban experiences, the National and World Exhibitions of nineteenth-century Europe occupied a particular place in a project of *bildung*: 'The world exhibitions were training schools in which the masses, barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value. "Look at everything; touch nothing"' (Benjamin 1999, p. 201, G16, 6). From such a point of view, *bildung* represents a form of discipline and training, such that the working classes of his day, and also us as members of mass culture in the present day, are expected and directed to 'buy' into commodity lifestyles and the values of capitalism.

*Are the authors talking of a world of isolation in cities or its opposite: over-connectedness? Paraphrasing Sartre's famous play, perhaps hell is not so much other people, even in populous cities across the globe; hell is forever being connected? Or is Sartre completely wrong - not a hell, but a joyful experience of cities as connectivity?*

A new form of *bildung* has made itself increasingly relevant in cities. It is what Løvlie (2002) has called a form of techno-cultural *bildung*, where the individual is less a self-autonomous entity, and more a decentred node in a network of connections. This network mediates contact with others through different forms of electronic communication, such as the cellular phone and the Internet. The individual's image/voice/emotion/body/presence becomes multi-contextual, present in more than a single place at any one moment in time, continually in flux and restlessly on

the move. Put more radically, the individual is now more a cyborg joined irrevocably to technology, and, when this technology malfunctions or is turned off, the person no longer feels they are living and 'connected'. One can wonder if it is even possible to be cocooned from contact with others nowadays, despite their close proximity in urban space. In this new form of *bildung*, the techno-cultural *bildung*, the goal is not the cultivation of clearly defined autonomous subjects. But this debate is far from decided, and there are still many supporters of a more traditional understanding of *bildung* in urban spaces. Simmel's (1950) famous essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* is still widely read and discussed, with his belief that living in cities requires autonomous individuals to cultivate rational strategies to protect the inner emotional, and ultimately vulnerable, self.

*Can the chapters in this book be read as the search for where the 'action' is in cities? Have the authors been searching for the memorable in the everyday and the everyday in the memorable? With such an action-based perspective can it be premised that we can learn in ever new ways?*

In each Australian state, a Chief Scientist is appointed for a period. They are public figures advocating for science in different practices by different professionals, such as in schools, policy, industry and so on. The first Chief Scientist of Queensland Peter Andrews<sup>1</sup> is apt to say: 'you have to go where the action is, and it is always at the intersection'. This in many ways summarises the electric attraction of cities for many. It is the place where things happen, the intersection, the marketplace, the arena, the scene of the crime, the accident, the celebration. If you are not there you might easily feel you are missing out. Even those adolescents who are just 'hanging' seem to be waiting for something to happen. But even the place of action and how we access it changes; if you are not present you might receive a live stream from those who are. Or, we can create our own action by searching for the digital markers of knowledge as we move through cities and touch on GPS nodes put down by others to explain the noteworthy or the historical. Are we not all looking for self- or other-experienced moments of voyeurism?

*Are the readers of the chapters in the book expected to become city researchers, teachers or activists, if they aren't already?*

It was a common point of debate in the 1970s to argue that every teacher in the classroom should be a researcher, researching the learning of the children. Today's version is that the teacher should always be evidence driven and always be up to date on the latest in classroom learning and teaching. In the context of this book, there is an expectation or a hope that the reader will turn into such a personage willing to inquire, learn and then teach others or themselves of cities in a research-informed manner. When I write the words researcher and teacher and add the word activist, I think of them embodied in one and the same person, and it is indicative of the reader as a moral person. To be in cities is to become in the sense of Aristotle (1981) in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, a certain kind of person who is encouraged, successfully or

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<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Andrews\\_\(scientist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Andrews_(scientist))

unsuccessfully, to take responsibility and advocate for cities and the learning directed actions they offer. Of course, I am not restricting my comment to the formally trained school teacher, but any person or professional motivated to teach and learn cities. Such an understanding is closely aligned with the debate on public pedagogy (Sandlin et al. 2010), which seeks to reach out and move beyond the classroom, intervening and critically engaging with city spaces and culture.

*I am struck on re-reading these chapters by the proposition that keeps echoing in my mind: ‘the more knowledge and experience I have of new cities, the harder it might become to understand and conceptualise them’. It is harder to reach a point of satisfaction, even if momentarily, in such an endeavour. Is it because I resist looking to interdisciplinary knowledge, preferring the safety and security of disciplinary knowledge?*

Adorno (1973) once wrote that our experience always risks being richer than our concepts.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that we continually seek to close this gap by refining our disciplinary knowledge or, alternatively, cultivate a form of knowledge that is hybrid rather than mono-disciplinary. The latter might thus hold the promise of more closely fitting the different and varied mosaic of people’s lived experience in cities. The editors have encouraged the exploration of such knowledge.

In advocating interdisciplinary approaches in this book, we are not seeking to generate a new, unified view of cities that integrates knowledge from separate disciplines and creates a more general, rather than specialised, form of knowledge. I am not advocating the dissolution of disciplines, a fear held by scholars such as Young (2008, pp. 6–7, 64). On the contrary, the resources of different disciplinary approaches are still very much in focus and continually to be drawn upon. I am reminded of a classic article on this matter by Nikitina (2007) who talks of the humanities who understand interdisciplinary work as a continual contextualisation that draws together knowledge from ideology, history and culture. The sciences view it as a bringing together of concepts from different knowledge areas, and if the task is product development or applied science, the interdisciplinary entails problem-based and inquiry-based learning and integration of knowledge.

A metatheoretical example is found in Bhaskar and Danermark’s (2006, pp. 289–290) understanding of critical realism where multifaceted knowledge emerges from a dialectic in a ‘four-planar social being’: (a) material transactions with nature (the effect of urban development on the physical environment), (b) social interaction between agents (e.g. decision-making patterns among actors that impact upon urban social structures), (c) social structure (e.g. the housing market’s impact on residential patterns) and (d) the stratification of embodied personalities of agents in terms of self-esteem, motivation and values.

In a recent visit to the city of Skopje in Macedonia, I was able to envisage how such a social being might generate interdisciplinary knowledge. The self-esteem of

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<sup>2</sup> ‘If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims’ (Adorno 1973, p. 365).

the population was deeply affected by a troubled history in which Greece, the southern neighbour, has historically sought to claim the country for its own. The housing in many parts still bore the marks of a time under socialism, where the lack of investment was noticeable. But, and most importantly, the social interaction between all exuded warmth, and there was strong motivation to survive, even though some suggested as much as 25% of the adolescent population would leave to work in Germany or other European countries.

This book is for me and hopefully for the reader a guidebook, a source of hints, images, (his)stories, experiences to inspire, explore, discover, map and learn the experiences and lives of cities.

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