

THE CITY AND THE CITIES: PROTOCOLS AND ARCHITECTURES OF UNINTERACTION AND COUNTER-STRATEGIES

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Abstract. This article examines the spatial and social mechanisms that regulate interactions between marginalized and privileged bodies – both human and more-than-human – in urban environments. It explores how uninteraction protocols and architectures enforce segregation, maintaining the divide between the city and the cities. The study proposes interaction protocols and architectures as an alternative framework to foster more inclusive urban ecologies. Drawing on science fiction as a conceptual tool to envision alternative urban configurations, this study employs *The City & The City* by China Miéville as an analytical framework. The findings reveal that urban space operates as a complex ecosystem where marginalized and privileged bodies coexist under social and political tensions regulated by uninteraction protocols. These protocols, materialized through uninteraction architectures, enforce segregation and perpetuate dominant narratives of exclusion. We identify emerging counter-practices – interaction protocols and architectures – that short-circuit uninteraction and enable the consequent collapse of the city and the cities into a single urban space, unique but multiple, understood as a place for the free association of beings. The research not only expands urban exclusion studies to include more-than-human perspectives but also employs science fiction as an intellectual framework to analyse urban space. By integrating the imaginative contributions of writers and artists, the research mobilizes an interdisciplinary speculative thought as a methodological tool, allowing for a reconfiguration of urban analysis beyond conventional paradigms.

Keywords: science fiction, architectures of uninteraction, protocols of uninteraction, marginalized bodies, privileged bodies, interspecies co-design.

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1. Introduction

In 2009, writer China Miéville published *The City & the City* (Miéville, 2009), a science fiction novel that blends elements of detective fiction with philosophical speculation and social critique. The narrative unfolds in the twin cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma, which occupy the same geographical space but are perceived – and inhabited – as separate entities by their respective citizens. This geographical co-existence of the cities is referred to in the novel as “gross-topically” overlap. From childhood, citizens of both cities are trained to interact exclusively with their own city while simultaneously “unnoticing” the other. This complex process of psychological self-suggestion involves an entire set of complementary cognitive protocols, such as “unseeing” and “unhearing.” Interaction between a citizen of one city and an object or person located in the other-city is considered an offense even graver than murder and is harshly punished by an entity known as “Breach.”¹

In this way, a physical street splits into two gross-topically distinct streets, overlapping in a complex, fluid geography². Despite occupying the same physical location, each street – gross-topically speaking – has its own name and distinct architectural features. The book describes in detail how the architecture of the two cities, along with other aspects of urban identity such as vehicles or citizens’ clothing, differs from one city to the other. By reading these signs, each citizen can efficiently identify foreign elements in order to immediately unnotice them. The unseeing and unhearing protocols are therefore designed to maintain the breach between the two cities, ensuring that the gross topical borders between Beszel and Ul Qoma remain unbroken. These cognitive protocols, encoded in the bodies and minds of their inhabitants from childhood, shape their individual and (un)collective spatial experience, allowing them to acknowledge only part of the reality perceived by their senses while rejecting the rest – thus preventing the

¹ These terms (“unnoticed”, “unsee”, “unhear”) are those employed by Miéville in the novel.

² The trade paperback edition of the novel included an interview with China Miéville by Paul Witcover, in which the writer employed this term (Miéville, 2010).

emergence of shared spatial, ecological, political, or affective commons. In other words: the protocols themselves produce space.

This mode of interaction – or rather, uninteraction – with the urban environment closely relates to a well-documented cognitive bias in psychology: selective perception (Vargas Melgarejo, 2014; Khanam et al., 2017). Defined as the tendency to fail to notice or to quickly forget stimuli that cause emotional distress and/or contradict preexisting beliefs (Shrum, 2015), this cognitive bias closely aligns with the mechanisms depicted in *The City & the City*.

Building on this idea, the primary objective of this article is to analyse and demonstrate how selective perception and the uninteraction protocols formulated by Miéville are not merely fictional constructs but are actively at work in our cities, decisively shaping how urban space is constructed and experienced. Through case study analysis and a review of the literature, this article seeks to show that these protocols already structure part of our urban experience, forming what is identified as architectures of uninteraction. Finally, it will argue for the urgent need to develop alternative protocols that, while acknowledging these dynamics, work to bridge the gaps that uninteraction opens between cities to recover the collective and necessarily conflictual dimension of the polis.

2. Intercity uninteraction protocols

In 2023, the nonprofit organization “Invisible People” released an educational animation titled “Think They Don’t Notice? Why Eye Contact with Homeless People Matters” (Invisible People, 2023). The video depicts a person walking through an urban environment, encountering various city inhabitants. They greet a person strolling with a dog and smile at a baby in a stroller pushed by their mother. However, upon encountering a homeless person, they exhibit a clear urgency to avoid eye contact – diverting their gaze toward their mobile phone or an advertisement on the other side of the street. They feel the need to look in any direction except at the person experiencing housing vulnerability right in front of them. Although they have positively interacted with other city residents, upon detecting the homeless person, they automatically execute a uninteraction protocol similar to the one described in Miéville’s work. They proceed to *unsee* a human being who does not inhabit *their same city*.

In “*Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor*” (Mukherjee, 2022), researcher Ankhi Mukherjee provides a detailed account of the mechanisms through which society renders the urban poor invisible. One of the most compelling aspects of the analysis is precisely how these marginalized groups experience a sense of isolation from the rest of the city’s inhabitants, who actively ignore and avoid them. This results in the collective perception of occupying different levels of urban space – levels distinct from those inhabited by people with greater resources – and the feeling that they can only interact with fellow human beings from *their own city*.

A study published in 2021 by researchers Vanessa Heaslip, Sue Green, Bibha Simkhada, Huseyin Dogan, and Stephen Richer (Heaslip et al. 2021) examined the experiences of homeless individuals seeking shelters, healthcare, and social services in an urban area in southwest England. As the article states:

“Qualitative data identified numerous systemic, individual and cultural obstacles, leaving difficulty for people in terms of knowing who to contact and how to access services, largely relying on word of mouth of other people who are homeless.”

The difficulty they face in interacting with inhabitants from *the city* forces them to rely heavily on word-of-mouth from people in similar situations – that is, from those who inhabit *their own city* – to obtain information about the location and availability of essential services. In fact, those who do not belong to this *other-city* inhabited by people experiencing housing vulnerability are often unaware of the location or even the existence of these facilities. These resources remain invisible to the eyes of individuals with greater economic security, despite sharing the same geographical space as the architectures they interact with daily – shopping malls, restaurants, schools, etc.

Continuous exposure to uninteraction protocols leads, in turn, to their normalization among those who experience them. In the article “What Happens When You Avert Your Eyes From the Homeless” (Basu, 2019), journalist Shumita Basu recounts the testimony of Michael González, who lived unhoused in New York for three years. When asked how it feels when people are “looked at as though air,” González explained:

“In the beginning it hurts. And then I think after a while it just started to annoy me. And then it angered me, and then it disgusted me. And then at some point it’s like, you just get used to it.”

However, such normalization does not lessen the suffering caused by this process of social ostracism. In 2019, psychologists Nejra Van Zalk and Rebecca Smith (Van Zalk & Smith, 2019), published a study on the relationship between the experience of being ignored in the urban environment and the mental health of homeless individuals. Their findings revealed that while experiencing daily discrimination is not a significant predictor of the development of psychopathologies, the experience of being actively ignored is³. In other words: the homeless individuals who participated in the study preferred to be subjected to a negative interaction rather than to an uninteraction⁴.

³ Among the examples of daily discrimination mentioned in the article, we find being treated with less courtesy than others, receiving lower-quality service in establishments, and so on (Van Zalk & Smith, 2019).

⁴ In another fiction, *Fight Club* (Palahniuk, 1996), the character Tyler Durden states that “it is better to be hated by God than to be the object of His indifference.” This reinforces the narrative that it is preferable to be the object of discrimination rather than to be subjected to the uninteraction protocols.

3. The plurality of uninteracted bodies

People experiencing housing vulnerability are not the only human bodies subjected to uninteraction protocols. Quite the contrary: whether due to gender (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011), race (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009), sexual orientation (Büttner et al., 2024), or socioeconomic background (Shingne, 2020), such protocols affect multiple groups. Moreover, uninteraction protocols extend beyond the human species itself to encompass more-than-human bodies. In their well-known book *Zoopolis* (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2013), Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka argue that non-domesticated more-than-human animals inhabiting the city “are visible when they become a problem, but invisible as ubiquitous members of the community” (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2013). This perspective evokes the existence of yet another *unseen city*, grosstopically overlapped upon the visible city and inhabited by a community of beings who, under normal circumstances, remain entirely unnoticed by humans. As in Miéville’s work, this assertion links the active act of *seeing* the inhabitants of this *other-city* to a negative event, directly conceptualizing it as problematic. The reasoning put forward by Donaldson and Kymlicka (2013) implies that, from the perspective of human society, as long as the status of those more-than-human beings inhabiting a grosstopically different city remains *unseen*, everything is considered to be in order. The gap between *the city* and *the cities* must be maintained for the system to function properly.

Researchers Paula Arcari, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, and Haley Singe state that:

“The hundreds of thousands of temporary, semi- and permanent nonhuman residents of cities around the world who are not considered ‘nature’ remain unseen. That they do not feature within conceptualizations of ‘nature’ is part of the problem; it is a concept that is mobilized in a way that forgets its own history and entanglement with domestication” (Arcari et al., 2021).

As Mukherjee does when discussing the urban experience of low-income individuals (Mukherjee, 2022), the authors here use the term “unseen” – un-see – rather than “invisible.” The difference between being invisible and being *unseen* lies in the attribution of responsibility for the act of not-seeing. When a being is invisible, the inability to see them stems from a perceptual limitation of the human itself. That is, as biologist Jakob von Uexküll⁵ (Uexküll, 2010) would argue, the stimulus remains outside our *Umwelt* for physiological reasons. In contrast, to *un-see* implies negligence, wherein the human actively silences their own sensory perception. It is not, therefore, a physiological issue but a cognitive one. We leave the realm of Uexküll’s

Umwelts to enter the domain of psychology and selective perception⁶.

Researcher Marie Carmen Shingne (Shingne, 2020) has compared the urban spatial experience of Buenos Aires’ “cartoneros” (waste pickers) to that of stray dogs, raccoons, and rats, noting that:

*“[...] many human and nonhuman residents are denied the right to the city through the use of othering techniques”*⁷.

Shingne extends the concept of “othering practices” beyond the city’s human inhabitants to more-than-human bodies, specifically referring to urban fauna species that inhabit the city outside human intent. These species have been described in the literature as “non-domesticated,” “wild,” “synanthropic,” “invasive,” and even “illegal” (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2013; Narayanan, 2017; Stoetzer, 2018; Hunold & Mazuchowski, 2020).

The mechanisms of othering applied to the *cartoneros* (waste pickers) are analogous to those deployed against stray dogs, rats, and other non-charismatic urban species, reflecting a common societal practice. Power discourses have historically employed pejorative associations between diverse bodies to perpetuate systems of domination. An emblematic case of this is found in Thomas Taylor’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (T. Taylor, 1792/1966), written as a parody of philosopher and activist Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft, 2004). Taylor uses irony to ridicule Wollstonecraft’s argument for gender equality by drawing an analogy between the supposed equality of women and men and a hypothetical intellectual and emotional parity between humans and animals, whom he derogatorily calls “brutes” (Anker, 2004). These exclusionary associations between different groups of marginalized bodies – intentionally imposed⁸ by dominant narratives to sustain systems of discrimination and stigmatization – can be traced back as far as the myth of Adam and Eve (Génésis 3:1–7, New International Version, 2011), where woman and serpent, in a perverse conspiracy, bring about the downfall of man,

⁵ Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of *Umwelt* posits that every living organism exists within its own unique sensory world, shaped by its biological capabilities and needs, which dictates how it perceives and interacts with its environment (Uexküll, 2010).

⁶ This additional layer is of great relevance for thinking about spatial production processes under conditions of environmentality, where a significant portion of the signals we receive are already modified at their source or through these constraints, thereby shaping the spatial agency of bodies (Jalón Oyarzun, 2024).

⁷ Marie Carmen Shingne builds upon Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the “right to the city,” exploring its implications in contemporary urban contexts. Shingne delves into the multifaceted dimensions of this right, examining how it shapes social movements, urban planning, and the experiences of marginalized communities within the framework of Lefebvre’s theoretical contributions (Shingne, 2020).

⁸ The concept of intentionality is crucial in this context for understanding the modern world’s desire to control difference. This is evident in the configuration of the exception as a tool for managing difference, with the rebellious body acting as a manifestation of that difference (García de Jalón Oyarzun, 2017; Mbembe & Dubois, 2017).

the original divine creation, whose only sin was trusting the woman.

Sunaura Taylor, in *Beasts of Burden: Disability Studies and Animal Rights* (S. Taylor, 2017), explores the intersection between animal rights and the rights of people with disabilities, arguing that the oppressions faced by both groups are deeply interconnected. Taylor, who has lived with congenital arthrogryposis since birth, begins her powerful account with the following statement:

"In my life I have been compared to many animals. I have been told I walk like a monkey, eat like a dog, have hands like a lobster, and generally resemble a chicken or penguin. [...] I argue that at the root of the insult in animal comparisons is a discrimination against nonhuman animals themselves. These non-humans, one large mass of greatly varying beings, are held together by one similarity—they aren't us. No matter how aware, sentient, or intelligent, they are the ultimate other."

Donaldson and Kymlicka themselves argue in *Zoopolis* (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2013) that:

"In this cultural imaginary, companion animals stay safely on the leash (rather than becoming feral), wild animals stay in zoos or in pristine wilderness far removed from humans, and livestock stay on the farm. Whenever any animal is found outside its 'proper, morally appropriate' space, it is seen as 'matter out of place', and hence as morally problematic. [...] Unwanted animals are stigmatized by being equated with unwanted humans (and vice versa)."

In *When Species Meet* (Haraway, 2008), Donna Haraway shares a reflection by Paul B. Preciado on the association between the marginalized body of the lesbian woman and that of the French bulldog in the context of late 19th-century European cities:

"Fabricated at the end of the nineteenth-century, French bulldogs and lesbians co-evolve from being marginal monsters into becoming media creatures and bodies of pop and chic consumption. Together, they invent a way of surviving and create an esthetics of human-animal life. Slowly moving from red-light districts to artistic boroughs all the way to television, they have ascended the species pile together. [...] The [dog's] ugly face, according to conventional beauty standards, echoes the lesbian refusal of the heterosexual canon of female beauty."

A particularly unique case of association between marginalized bodies within the city is found in Marcus Baynes-Rock's doctoral research (Baynes-Rock, 2012), which documents the unusual coexistence of humans and hyenas in Harar, Ethiopia. Baynes-Rock describes certain associations between specific marginalized human groups and these animals. For example, Baynes-Rock recounts the reactions of different inhabitants of Harar (both human and hyena) to the torrential rains that sporadically fall on the city.

Most humans would rush to find shelter, stack buckets to collect precious water, and cover themselves to protect their hairstyles or clothing. The only bodies that did not react immediately to the downpour were the hyenas and the homeless. In this urban portrait of Harar in the rain, Baynes-Rock identifies two cities that, though overlapping, are different. The inhabitants of *the city* have homes and possessions to protect from the rain, as well as urgent tasks to complete when it begins to pour, whereas the inhabitants of *the other-cities* – whether hyenas or homeless individuals – possess none of these things and barely react to the rainfall. They all coexist in the same geographic space but inhabit gross topically different cities, each with distinct relationships to the landscape and weather phenomena.

This association at the margins of bodies within the urban environment not only extends beyond the human to the realm of more-than-human living beings but also exceeds the biotic to reach technological bodies. Much has been said, for instance, about the case of the Long Island Bridges, designed by Robert Moses with an underpass height so low that it prevented bus transit (Campanella, 2017; Caro, 2024). Regardless of whether this discrimination was intentional or accidental, the architectural design effectively excluded not only the racialized bodies of low-income individuals who could not afford private vehicles but also the technological body of the bus itself. On one side of the bridge were the marginalized bodies – that is, people with fewer resources and buses – while, on the other, the privileged bodies made use of the urban space – that is, upper-class people and their cars⁹.

In the gross topical overlap, without interior or exterior, between *the city* and *the cities*, *the breach* separating privileged bodies from marginalized bodies subjected to uninteraction protocols is not determined by the fact of being or not an individual belonging to the human species. Rather, the line that produces the othering of certain bodies – whether human or more-than-human – is a construct shaped by the complex intersection of cultural, socioeconomic, ecological, historical, and political factors.

4. Building the city that unsees: uninteraction architectures

As previously discussed, according to researchers Paula Arcari, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, and Haley Singer (Arcari et al., 2021), the mental conditioning mechanism that leads us to *unsee* the non-domesticated inhabitants of

⁹ Studies show that advanced technologies (such as luxury electric vehicles, smart home systems, or high-speed connectivity tools) are prevalent in affluent neighbourhoods, while disadvantaged areas still have obsolete technologies or concentrate the most intrusive support infrastructure, such as telecommunications towers and waste processing plants. Another example is the use, by homeless people, of obsolete analog technologies and technical devices that prioritize power source longevity due to limited access to electrical supply infrastructure (Paynter, 2019; Martín Muñoz, 2022).

these *more-than-human-cities* lies in the prior construction, within the urban sphere, of a concept of “nature” that accepts certain beings while excluding others. The idea of the city as an artifact that privileges some bodies while discriminating against others – whether human or more-than-human – has been widely debated in academic literature (Weisman, 1992; Philol, 1995; Narayanan, 2017; Steele et al., 2019). Jonathan Metzger, in his article “Cultivating Torment” (Metzger, 2016), posed the following question:

“How can we begin to cope with the insight that one of the central purposes of planning processes is to generate the preconditions that allow certain beings and entities to thrive, while banishing others, which we define as pathological or malignant, out of the city?”

Low bridges preventing buses from passing, staircases that make access impossible for people with reduced mobility, all kinds of hostile architectures¹⁰ such as benches designed with dividers to prevent unhoused individuals from lying down, or spikes, nets, and traps deterring pigeons and other urban inhabitants from occupying certain spaces, are some of the architectural devices that materially articulate uninteraction. The protocols need the material infrastructure afforded by these architectures of uninteraction to maintain the gap between *the city* and *the cities* – that is, to design and enforce the boundaries between them, defining their possible spaces and forcing their separation to prevent their inhabitants from interacting with each other.

In 1928, Alexander Klein envisioned the “House for frictionless living” (Wurster & Penner, 2020), proposing a residential model in which the movement of household inhabitants was separated from that of service personnel, ensuring that their paths never intersected (Figure 1).

Researcher Daniel Koch, who analyzed this and other similar cases (Koch, 2016), referred to this phenomenon as “programmed avoidance”. Koch (2016) highlights how avoidance processes in urban environments function as performative dynamics structuring both social and spatial relationships. Avoidance is not merely the absence of interaction but rather a form of coexistence laden with social and political tensions that perpetuate segregation and consolidate both symbolic and physical barriers between different urban strata. Thus, uninteraction architectures materialize in spaces where marginalized and privileged bodies maintain a *co-absence* regulated by the uninteraction protocols, ensuring that encounters are minimal or, when they do occur, socially controlled through mechanisms of selective perception, thereby preserving the *status quo* of urban segregation between *the city* and *the cities*. This points to the impossibility of untangling

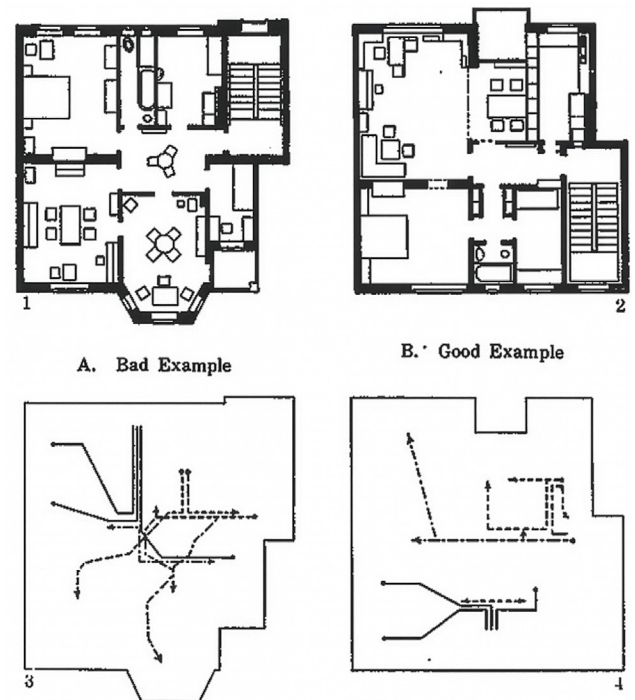


Figure 1. Separation of household and service circulation in Alexander Klein’s “House for Frictionless Living” (Source: *Modern Housing* (Wurster & Penner 2020))

architectures and protocols of uninteraction, as they form an inextricable operative assemblage.

Beyond the spaces designed under this condition of “programmed avoidance” of which Koch (2016) speaks and those other examples mentioned above, such as hostile architecture, there are numerous types of uninteraction architectures that shape the relationships between privileged and marginalized bodies in urban environments. As we explained in the previous section of this article, privileged bodies are not always human, even when the marginalized body is. In the analysis of human/hyena interactions in Harar, Baynes-Rock offers a significant example of this: the “Hyena Holes” (Figure 2), openings made in the city’s walls whose purpose was to allow the passage of hyenas while restricting human access, such as an army (Baynes-Rock, 2012).

In other cases, uninteraction architectures aim to prevent interactions between different more-than-human bodies – some in positions of privilege and others in a position of marginality. For example, in the Karni Mata Temple in India, architectural devices such as protective traps and nets are designed to prevent the approximately 20,000 sacred rats residing in the temple (*kabas*) from interacting with other bodies considered of lesser status, such as common rats, dogs, cats, birds, or even humans from lower castes¹¹ (Trembley, 2022; Frías-Sánchez et al., 2024b).

¹⁰Hostile architecture refers to urban design strategies that intentionally restrict the use of public spaces by certain groups of people, often the homeless, through physical barriers or discomfort-inducing elements (de Fine Licht, 2017; Rosenberger, 2020).

¹¹In the article “Jatikaran: Caste, Rats, and the control of space at the Karni Mata Mandir”, researcher Kyle J. Trembley writes: “Access is prohibited to common rats and to human beings belonging to the Dalit caste as well” (Trembley, 2022).



Figure 2. Hyena Hole in the wall of Harar. Photograph courtesy of Marcus Baynes-Rock (Baynes-Rock, 2012)

However, in times of environmentality (Hörl & Schott, 2018), we cannot think of uninteraction architectures exclusively from the physical point of view of the merely built, but rather as a series of devices and systems that articulate the interactions and social relations (Jaque, 2019) between the inhabitants of *the city* and *the cities*. In this sense, algorithms offer us a paradigmatic example. These logical structures, which operate both on digital platforms and in automated systems, filter and model our interactions, reconfiguring the signals of our surrounding worlds, and establishing systems that privilege some bodies while alienating others (Noble, 2018). The algorithm of an application like Tinder, for example, selects potential partners based on criteria that respond to designs that prioritize certain bodies over others based on physical, economic, or social characteristics (Toma & Hancock, 2010). A system based on the exclusion of bodies (whether for reasons of age, height, race, social level, etc.) that often translates into physical encounters in urban spaces such as bars, squares, cinemas, or private domestic contexts (Besplemnova, 2016; Beyer, 2018).

This same logic acquires broader connotations in larger-scale control systems. For example, as facial recognition is increasingly used in collective housing or public places as a form of access, automated prejudices are spatialized in its operation, prohibiting access to black citizens with whose skin the systems operate with a higher error rate (Fadulu, 2019; Heilweil, 2019). In China, the Social Credit System means that, in the event of losing points, citizens lose access and see how their space and capacity for action, that is, *their city*, is reduced and alienated¹² (Liu & Rona-Tas, 2024).

¹²In addition to functioning as protocols that model urban and digital interactions, these algorithms materialize in data centers, architectures where design also operates according to the logic of “programmed avoidance” discussed earlier, though in this case intended to prevent contact between human beings and robotic entities (Pestellini Laparelli, 2020; Perales Santiago & Frías Sánchez, 2022).

Beyond algorithms, we find other uninteraction protocols in urban wildlife control strategies in large cities. For example, through the use of hawks or the administration of sterilizing feed to keep pigeon populations at bay (Cook et al., 2008; Klug et al., 2022). Faced with these situations, some species have developed their own adaptive responses: animals such as urban foxes or certain birds alter their habits to avoid human contact, shifting their activities to nocturnal hours (Byrne & Wolch, 2009), that is, building *their own cities* as a form of protection. We see, in this case, as in the case pointed out by Baynes-Rock in Harar, where the wall allows passage to the (friendly) hyenas but not to the (enemy) humans, that what is really at stake in maintaining the gap between *the city* and *the cities* is the need to politicize interactions and uninteractions, understanding architecture not as a barrier but as a facilitator of one thing or the other, as political ecologies that require the active constitution of all the realities involved.

5. Interaction protocols (or the polis as political ecology)

If we return for a moment to the animation made by “Invisible People”, we will observe that one of the urban users with whom its protagonist interacts is, in fact, a dog. The person manifests a markedly positive attitude when encountering this animal, which, when linked to a human being by means of a leash (a control device), is perceived as a domestic (and legitimate) inhabitant of *their same city*. The person’s interaction with the dog is equivalent to the interaction with the baby and its mother, and, of course, does not require the application of any uninteraction protocols, since that animal inhabits, as we have already said, *their same city*. What would have happened if, instead of a dog that goes on a leash with a human being, they had come across a rat that comes out of some bushes and hurries into the sewer system?

We could assume that, in this situation, two main paths would open up. The first would be, effectively, the application of uninteraction protocols¹³ (Cummins, 2023). Just as they do when they cross paths with the homeless person, the person would *unsee* the rat as soon as each one continued on their own way. They would instinctively *unnotice* that representative of *the other-cities* with which *their own city* is gross topically overlapped (in this case, an inhabitant from *the city of rats*).

But there would be a second path, in which that person *sees* the rat and confronts the fact that they share urban space with a community of animals that live very close to their own home, in *a city* gross topically overlapped with *their own*. Through this path, as in *The City & The City*, the interaction would, most likely, end up having negative consequences. The weaker body involved in the interaction, that is, the more-than-human body, would end up suffering the consequences of having committed *a breach*¹⁴.

However, we wonder if this option, the option of *seeing* the inhabitants of *the other-cities*, the option that does not execute uninteraction protocols, could instead lead to non-negative or even mutualistic interactions. If that act of *seeing* could result not in a confrontation and violence derived from the rupture of *the breach*, but in acceptance and mutual recognition. In the case of the rat as well as in the case of the homeless people, as in so many other cases of uninteraction that we could mention in the urban environment between privileged and marginalized bodies, can we conceive of the deployment of something that we could define as “Interaction Protocols” among bodies? Protocols that act with the purpose of configuring an architecture conceived not only as a one-dimensional barrier but as a political ecology (Haraway, 2008; Charles, 2014; Trembley, 2022; Frías-Sánchez et al., 2023, 2024b). Architectures of interaction capable of short-circuiting, mediating, or interfering with uninteraction. The short circuit involves provoking a blockage in the circulatory imperative of the city as a homogeneous field without an outside. Similarly, interference results from introducing something in the path of a wave, which transforms it. In both cases, the aim is to denaturalize the process of alienation, generate estrangement that forces the sensitive experience to be restarted.

Currently, both researchers and practitioners are increasingly engaging in diverse forms of “hacking” to subvert protocols and architectures of disinteraction, working toward an urban environment co-designed by all its inhabitants. In “Hacking Hostile Architecture: Gentle

Disobedience in Neoliberal Public Space,” Alex Trotta documents the rebellion of the “Design For Everyone” collective against the hostile architecture deployed in the city of Brussels (Trotta, 2020). Researchers Antitza Dantcheva, Cunjian Chen, and Arun Ross have investigated how specific makeup designs can “hack” facial recognition systems (Dantcheva et al., 2012). We even have examples of scientific research that delves into ways of breaking the uninteraction protocols imposed by the Tinder algorithm (Toma & Hancock, 2010; Appel et al., 2023).

In the field of interspecies interaction between human and more-than-human agents, in our article “Living Walls: Octavia E. Butler and Xenoarchitecture as an Interspecies Mediator,” we analysed the Interspecies Interaction Protocols deployed in three unusual examples of buildings that achieve this human/other-than-human positive exchange: both the National Palace of Mafra’s library and Coimbra University’s Joanina Library, where colonies of common pipistrelle bats reside behind bookshelves, emerging at night to protect centuries-old books by consuming insects; and Rajasthan’s Karni Mata Temple, where over twenty thousand venerated rats coexist harmoniously with humans. In a case study on human-bear coexistence in Colorado (Boonman-Berson et al., 2016), the conventional uninteraction protocol – designed to prevent any human-bear contact – was intentionally bypassed in favor of an interaction protocol that facilitated controlled interspecies engagement. In a medium-sized city located on the Front Range, local residents reported an incident involving these animals. These residents had inadvertently left their garage door open, which housed a refrigerator filled with food. Consequently, the bears entered the domestic space and consumed the contents of the refrigerator. Instead of forcibly preventing the bears from accessing in the house again, the interspecies interaction protocol approach allowed them to voluntarily return to the garage and discover the absence of food, ultimately leading them to cease their visits without human intervention. These and other cases (Fuentes, 2010; Baynes-Rock, 2012; Steele et al., 2019; Barua & Sinha, 2022) illustrate how architecture has the potential to mediate non-negative, and even mutualistic, interaction protocols. These acts of resistance suggest the need for a paradigm shift – one that moves beyond mere subversion toward the proactive implementation of interspecies co-design frameworks, fostering urban environments that mediate rather than exclude.

What remains ahead, therefore, is not only a work of collecting, understanding, and re-producing these alternative protocols, but also the crucial task of forging new ones. These will help us recover the *polis* as a political space, as the place where conflict should not be eliminated, but recognized as the constituent source of its richness not only social, but socio-ecological. They will help us collapse *the city* and *the cities* into a single urban space, unique but multiple, understood as a place for the free association of beings, whether these be human or more-than-human, have normative or non-normative bodies, or have high or low economic resources.

¹³Eleanor Cummins, in the article “Rats Have Taken Over Our Cities – And We Can’t Stop Them” writes the following: “New Yorkers have always found ways of coping with the rodents underfoot: Ignore them” (Cummins, 2023).

¹⁴Generally, when the frontier between *the city* and *the city-of-any-species-that-is-not-welcome* in the urban environment is broken, the human being employs violent protocols aimed at its extermination (Wundram & Ruback, 1986; Frías-Sánchez et al., 2024a).

6. Conclusions

The analysis of uninteraction in the urban space reveals a complex network of relationships between marginalized and privileged bodies. The urban environment is a complex ecosystem where *the city* and *the cities*, gross topically overlapped, maintain a coexistence loaded with social and political tensions and regulated by uninteraction protocols. The invisibility, alterization, alienation, and marginalization of certain bodies, whether these be human or more-than-human, are the product of social and cultural constructions, imposed intentionally by dominant narratives in order to perpetuate systems of discrimination and stigmatization of certain bodies.

These uninteraction protocols are mediated by what we might call “uninteraction architectures”, whose ultimate goal is to maintain *the breach* between *the city* and *the cities*, that is, to design and enforce the boundaries between them, defining their possible spaces and forcing their separation to prevent their inhabitants from interacting with each other.

To build more just and sustainable cities, to build cities understood as political ecologies, it is essential to recognize the interdependence between all beings that co-create them and to promote practices that respect the diversity and complexity of urban ecosystems. The promotion of architectures of interaction, systems and devices at the service of interaction protocols, is a necessary step for the rupture of the gap and the consequent collapse of *the city* and *the cities* into a single urban space, unique but multiple, understood as a place for the free association of beings.

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