Cities made differently

Try imagining another urban existence

David Graeber & Nika Dubrovsky

November 22nd, 2024

Contents

In thousands of ways, we are taught to accept the world we live in as the only possible one, but thousands of other ways of organizing homes, cities, schools, societies, economies, and cosmologies have existed and could exist.

We started a project called Made Differently: designed to play with the possibility and to overcome the suspicion—instilled in us every day—that life is limited, miserable, and boring.

Our first focus is Cities Made Differently, exploring different ways of living together. Read and imagine four different kinds of cities taken from our book which are listed below, and continue your exploration, downloadable at a4kids.org, for drawing and dreaming.

City of Greed

What if you had to live in a city whose citizens must pay not only for housing and health care but also for the air they breathe?

The dystopian novel *The Air Merchant* takes place in a secret underground factory city. Mr. Bailey, the factory owner, condenses air from the atmosphere and sells it to his fellow citizens for a profit. Eventually, the Earth's atmosphere thins, creating a catastrophic shortage of breathable air. With the price of air increasing, fewer and fewer humans can afford to keep breathing.

When people can't pay for the air they breathe, the police throw them out of the city. Everyone lives in constant fear of suffocating, thinking only of how to earn enough money to spare their loved ones and themselves that terrible fate. The food company Nestlé is often criticized for its irresponsible use of water in India, Pakistan, and other developing countries. Captured in the documentary film *We Feed the World* (2005), former Nestlé chairman Peter Brabeck-Letmathe said:

"It's a question of whether we should privatize the normal water supply for the population. And there are two different opinions on the matter… NGOs, who bang on about declaring water a public right… That's an extreme solution. The other view says that water is a foodstuff like any other, and like any other foodstuff, it should have a market value. Personally, I believe it's better to give a foodstuff a value so that we're all aware it has its price…"

City as a Family

Imagine a city without any strangers, where everything is shared, and everyone looks after each other. There are no shops, no money, and no danger at all.

We think of the family as a group that practices "basic communism": from each according to his ability to each according to his needs. Any family is thought to be protected by bonds of kinship from the cruel laws of the outside world. Unlike businesses, rarely will a family throw out a sick child or an elderly parent because they are no longer "revenue-generating assets."

According to Roman law, which still underlies the value system of Western societies, a family was all those people living within the household of a *paterfamilias* or father whose authority over them was recognized as absolute. Under the protection of her father, a woman might be spared abuse from her husband, but their children, slaves, and other dependents were his to do with as he wanted.

According to early Roman law, a father was fully within his rights to whip, torture, or sell them. A father could even execute his children, provided that he found them to have committed capital crimes. With his slaves, he didn't even need that excuse.

The patriarchal family is also the model for authoritarianism. In ancient Rome, the patriarch had the right to treat his household members as property rather than as equal human beings.

The Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that humankind originally lived in small bands of hunter-gatherers composed of close friends and relatives until big cities and agriculture emerged, and with them wars, greed, and exploitation.

However, archaeology shows us numerous examples of how people in different times and across different parts of the Earth lived in large metropolitan areas while managing their collective affairs on a fairly egalitarian basis. At the same time, there have always been small communities where status inequality prevailed and a privileged minority at the top benefited by exploiting the rest.

We know from our personal experience that in almost every family there are elements of both authoritarianism and baseline communism. This contradiction never fully goes away but different cultures handle it differently.

A City of Runners

The people who live in this city believe that real life is all about constant competition.

The people in a city of runners find it fascinating or even necessary to keep track of who among them is more important, who is richer, smarter, more beautiful, or more worthy. There are many ideas about how the city came to have habits like this.

One of the city's revered philosophers, Thomas Hobbes, believed that the natural state of human beings is to seek violent domination over their neighbors, and that society without the authority of the sovereign would quickly turn into a battle of all against all. Constant competition between people is thus seen as an enjoyable game as compared to real war, which is always lurking around the corner.

Naturally, in cities like this, there must be some who are poor, ugly, and unhappy. Just as in some children's games, there are winners and losers.

People living in the city of runners foster an admiration for winning in their kids, and an ambition to surpass their peers in all areas. Children in the city of runners have no interest in learning together, sharing, or mutual aid. Helping someone pass an exam is considered "cheating" and is strictly punished. All their lives, adults are engaged in constant competition over beauty, skill, and wealth.

Runners believe that people who live differently from them and who refuse to play their games simply choose to be losers. During the 1968 student unrest in Western countries, some disaffected young people abandoned the big cities for the "sleepy" provinces where they created autonomous settlements, many of which still exist today.

Underground City

Living in an underground city could be safe and convenient. Without weather, there's no risk of storms. And no trees mean no forest fires.

Underground cities have been around practically forever. The city of Derinkuyu in the Turkish province of Cappadocia, for example, was built between 2000 and 1000 BCE. The landscape of volcanic tuff—a unique soft stone—could be hollowed out without requiring complex tools, making room to house 20,000 people. The underground city boasted a stable, corrals, churches, schools, canteens, bakeries, barns, wine cellars, and workshops. The intricate system of tunnels connecting it all together meant that intruders would not know their way around and quickly get lost.

Tunnels are found underneath many cities. Rome is famous for its catacombs, and at one time subterranean burial chambers were commonplace. These days, tunnels tend to be for underground trains called subways. In Beijing, the residents became so fearful of nuclear war that they built an entire bunker city, with 30 kilometers of tunnels connecting underground houses, schools, hospitals, shops, libraries, theaters, and factories. There's even an underground roller skating rink!

Mexico City has not gone as far as to build an entire city underground, but architect Esteban Suarez is planning an underground apartment building. And what a building it will be! Piercing the center of the Mexican capital with its tip will be a 65-story pyramid—no wonder they call it the earthscraper. The glass-enclosed area above the surface will be for recreation and outdoor concerts.

Underground, the building will be heated and powered with geothermal energy, making the pyramid energy self-sufficient. It's not easy building downward into the earth, but building underground won't disrupt the historical landscape of the city. And it evades the city's building codes restricting the height of structures to eight floors.

Mirny, a town in the Russian far north, has its eye on an abandoned diamond mine as the site for an underground city. There are no more diamonds to be found, but its abandonment threatens neighboring villages with cave-ins and landslides. Moscow architect Nikolai Lyutomsky has proposed a solution: building a strong concrete skeleton inside the quarry to strengthen its walls while covering its top with a transparent dome, resulting in an underground eco-city fit for 10,000 people.

Located in the Yakutia Republic, the town has a harsh arctic climate with temperatures reaching as low as -60 degrees Celsius in the winter. But underground, the temperature never falls below zero. The quarry would thus be good for both people and plants. Its architects have allocated most of the city's inner space to vertical farms. Farms for food production, technical laboratories, factories, and research centers are located underground and, aboveground, there will be play centers and schools. Moving between the underground and the surface is quick and easy.

Going underground to avoid possible misfortunes—might seem like a good idea, but there's a catch: if you don't like the rules of your community it's tough to get out. How important is it to be able to easily leave one community, whose rules no longer suit you, and join a different one?

David Graeber was an anthropologist and activist and is a bestselling author. Nika Dubrovsky is an artist, writer, and founder of the David Graeber Institute and the Museum of Care.

David Graeber & Nika Dubrovsky
Cities made differently
Try imagining another urban existence
November 22nd, 2024

https://www.counterpunch.org/2024/11/22/cities-made-differently-try-imagining-another-urban-existence/