

How can artists and scientists co-create regenerative projects in cities?  
TNoC Roundtable

## Unreal Estate: A Dialogue with Pigeons



Feral Pigeons, Central Manchester. Photo David Haley

With two thirds of an expanding/migrating human population expected to live in cities by 2050, how will we/they cope with the nexus of climate, species and cultural crises? Are cities fit for purpose? Are regenerative city projects relevant and what can artists and scientists contribute? To start this brief inquiry, I asked some pigeons what they thought about the situation...

The pigeons told me that since their cultivation in Mesopotamia about 9,000 years ago, cities have always been about ecology and economics, culture and power. Initially created within the Fertile Crescent, as fortified trading posts to protect and barter cereals for other goods, these settlements offered sedentary forms of culture and social order. Alongside agriculture and animal husbandry, writing, philosophy, construction, planning and money emerged as marks of civilization. And the rest, as they say, is history. However, such organisation was completely dependent on the natural resources of water, biodiversity and a clement climate.

Meanwhile, around the same time that cities were invented in Mesopotamia, rock doves were worshiped, domesticated and eaten by people. Some rock doves escaped to evolve into town or feral pigeons, adapting to and thriving from urban development. Feeding on people's excess grains, these pigeons found shelter and nesting sites in urban construction. Their symbiotic contribution was to give excrement, as precious organic fertiliser, for the expanding agricultural systems that advanced human sustenance and well-being.

Fast forward to the present day... Now regarded as ubiquitous pests and the subject of much misinformation, pigeons and their excrement are thought to generate disease, deface civic buildings and devalue the real estate owned by international investment corporations. Instead, synthetic fertiliser is now procured from industrialised carbon-based processes that profit agro-industrial global markets, while millions of city dwellers go hungry. Forced to migrate from subsistence farming to become dependent on faltering urban infrastructure and systems, city streets are paved with homeless and destitute people, rather than gold. This shift in values mirrors the nexus of climate, species and cultural crises. Pigeons, however, are one of only six animals that can understand the reality of mirrors... a capability that now seems lost to humans.

Regenerative Design, like decolonisation have become 'hot topics' recently and there are many things that our existing cities and future cities can learn from them. Indeed, there are things that they can learn from each other to co-create better ways of living and being. Remaining vigilant to avoid the pitfalls of dogmatic framework methodologies, we need to be simultaneously critical of the power within the systems we deploy and open to other ways of becoming. In other words, cities need to be able to emerge with planetary and human evolution, rather than trying to dictate it; something pigeons have done despite human attempts to cull them from cities. Regeneration must, also, be understood in the context of natural death and renewal of all living systems. If cities are to have future meaning, we must accept collapse as well as regeneration.

Co-created projects by artists and scientists may be interesting, but a co-learning dialogue with diverse, local people and other-than-humans, like pigeons, may be more insightful and creative. Such citizen participation could be more useful when it comes to regenerating how we live as a whole. We may then be able to attribute real value to how cities, serve their inhabitants by being embedded in ecology and culture, rather than extractive global economics and power for the few.

This is the message brought home from the perspective of a flock of feral town pigeons, one of the most intelligent, successful and resourceful species on our planet.