

Ancient Polis as a Fertile Ground for Reimagining Contemporary Pleasurable Places

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ABSTRACT This paper deals with the contemporary, dynamic relation between people and the places they inhabit, by examining whether relative antique philosophical concepts – *eudaimonia* and *hedonism* – might serve as a basis for what we call today *well-being*. Further, this paper explores Socrates' and Plato's belief that a polis (ancient city-state) was a significant social phenomenon, far more important than individuals' well-being. Building upon this premise, the paper navigates the intricate relationship between individual and collective well-being within modern urban contexts. The thin line between hedonism and self-interest is investigated in the contemporary urban framework – that of an individualistic, consumerist, and materialistic world, with limited and shared spaces and resources.

In conclusion, this paper advocates for a rethinking of the ancient Greek polis as a source of inspiration for reimagining urban futures, by integrating historical wisdom with contemporary urban planning practices to foster more equitable, sustainable, and fulfilling urban environments.

Key words: city, eudaimonia, hedonism, place, polis, well-being.

1. Introduction

Many contemporary societies are witnessing intensive urban transformations, accelerated by rapid globalization. According to the United Nations report¹, almost 2.5 billion people will be living in urban areas by 2050, which puts cities in a dominant position in the economic, social and political context. However, some of the negative impacts of this process have been detected globally, but are much more evident in undeveloped and transitioning countries: homogenization and standardization of cities; commercialized functions replacing social functions in cities; privatization of public spaces, which additionally contributed to the expansion of capital for the upper social classes, and the weakening of the well-being of the poor social classes; exploitation of public and common resources and finally, neglect of the local communities' needs in place making (Iguman, 2021). Also, one of the biggest challenges in such contexts is radical and inconsistent urban development, often at the expense of protected heritage objects and structures, with the financial benefit as usually the only driver (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009).

Such tendencies gain even more significance considering that cities have always played a crucial role in the lives of individuals and entire communities – from ancient polis to modern cities – serving as centres of human interaction and material exchange within confined spaces, with limited resources, and shared goods. Therefore, we ask – how to equilibrate the seeking and accomplishing of pleasurable living, balancing between individual, potentially egoistic needs, and collective well-being.

Our inquiry starts with an examination of philosophical theories of well-being, as historically practised in the ancient polis. Two such concepts, *eudaimonia* and *hedonism*, have long been associated with notions of individual and communal well-being.

These philosophical concepts are relevant for the understanding of well-being, because they provide foundational frameworks for examining the nature of timeless human sentiments - happiness, flourishing, and fulfilment. Of particular interest to us is the investigation of contemporary factors within the spatial and living environment, which contribute to the attainment of such states of mind. Current policy agendas² and academic discourses (Ramirez Rubio et. al 2019) recognise the effect of public spaces and the environment on people's well-being. These beneficial properties are not restricted to material aspects of cities. Rather, they include the social elements of spaces and their shared and collective use, which create a *sense of place* - the experiential and expressive way that places are known, imagined, sought for, held, recalled, voiced, lived, debated, and somehow connected to identity (Feld and Basso, 1996: 3-13). Together with a sense of belonging, these feelings are responsible for emotional stability, social support and identity formation.

¹ United Nations

² Creating Healthy Cities

Finally, the juxtaposition of ancient philosophical premises with contemporary concepts aims to uncover delicate similarities that affirm the necessity of integrating the materiality of urban built forms and infrastructure with the intangible social, cultural, and economic dynamics inherent to city life (Schlögel, 2009). The selection of these contemporary concepts is guided by their resonance with the ancient philosophies explored earlier in our discourse.

I

Most ancient philosophical, especially ethical, theories devoted a lot of attention to the well-being of citizens, with the main goal of exploring how to achieve happiness and a comfortable life, in harmony with reason.

For living is obviously shared even by plants, while what we are looking for is something special to a human being. We should therefore rule out the life of nourishment and growth. Next would be some sort of sentient life, but this again is clearly shared by the horse, the ox, indeed by every animal. What remains is a life, concerned in some way with action, of the element that possesses reason. (Of this element, one part has reason in being obedient to reason, the other in possessing it and engaging in thought.) As this kind of life can be spoken of in two ways, let us assume that we are talking about the life concerned with action in the sense of activity, because this seems to be the more proper use of the phrase (Aristotle, 2000: 1098b).

Socrates, for instance, thought that people, to be wise, had to be virtuous. According to him, virtue could be learned, thus the educational process played the most important role in one's life. For him, an individual had to understand what it meant to be good, i.e. what goodness was. However, Socrates's main goal was the well-being of the entire city-state (*polis*).

The most precise translation of the Greek word *polis* (πόλις) is a city. Yet, in the context of ancient Greek civilization, polis must be understood as a blend of city, state and city-state. As a city, it represented a territory where a larger group of people could live by sharing common practical interests owing to which their daily lives would be smoother and more enjoyable. As a state, a polis was considered a unity around a small, defined territory, with its own legal, political and spiritual identity, and with the citizens in a defined political and juridical context (Hansen, 2006: 64). The polis, especially for Socrates and Plato, was an extremely significant social phenomenon, much more important than the individuals themselves, who were supposed to devote all their abilities and knowledge to the main goal – a prosperous and developed polis. As Gunderbloom writes, Plato claimed that the polis, grounded on human virtues and justice, was a fertile place for developing various kinds of potentials of all its citizens

(Gilderbloom, 2019: 630-639). Aristotle pursued the quest for the goal for itself – *telos* (particularly in the first chapter of his *Nicomachean Ethics*). In the polis, people performed different activities to achieve certain goals – they practised gymnastics in order to be healthy and fit, or tried to win a rhetoric competition to gain reputation and fame. According to Aristotle, the instrumental value of such activities was not self-sufficient (αὐτάρκεια) whereas *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία) was. Although *eudaimonia* is usually translated as *happiness*, that is imprecise because it does not include everything that Aristotle meant under that term:

Happiness (*eudaimonia*) in particular is believed to be complete without qualification, since we always choose it for itself and never for the sake of anything else. Honour, pleasure, intellect, and every virtue we do indeed choose for themselves (since we would choose each of them even if they had no good effects), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness; whereas happiness no one chooses for the sake of any of these nor indeed for the sake of anything else (Aristotle, 2000: 1097b).

Besides happiness, *eudaimonia* should be understood as a state of well-being or flourishing. It might be understood as "true" or "real" happiness, or the "sort of happiness worth seeking or having" (Hursthouse, 2002: 11). In addition, it is important to emphasize that *eudaimonia* entails a life led, ruled and guided by a reason: "...essentially the sort of life that brings satisfaction and of which we congratulate or "felicitate" the possessors" (Sharples, 1996: 113).

Later philosophical schools, such as Epicureans, adopted the notion of *eudaimonia* as well-being and offered different understandings and ways to achieve it. Thus, even if people would accept well-being as a goal for itself, not for something else, they would need to fulfil a few conditions to achieve and experience well-being.

Epicurus considered *hedonism* (hedone - ἡδονή) to be a self-sufficient goal and the ultimate aim of philosophy. He claimed that the only thing people desire for their own sake is pleasure, which he categorized as psychological egoistic hedonism (O'Keefe, 2009: 113). Hedonism or pleasure was commonly interpreted negatively – as an irrational gratification of life's baser cravings. However, Epicurus held the exact opposite view (Nišavić, 2022: 172). Namely, his "objective was not the production of a good citizen but a happy and contented man, and "happiness was defined as health of mind and health of body" (DeWitt, 1954: 166). Or, as Raphael Wolf puts it: "Pleasure is the goal of life for an Epicurean. But it was pleasure of a particular kind that represented this goal, namely lack of pain in body (*aponia*) and lack of distress in soul (*ataraxia*)" (Woolf, 2009: 158).

Although both *eudaimonia* and *hedonism* are often associated with well-being, a precise differentiation is needed. Hedonism might be understood as a type of active pleas-

ure which could, in the simplest form, be identified as a process of fulfilling our wishes and desires. We can grasp such a state as a *change* when we move from one state/condition to another, a more comfortable and desirable one. In this process, external stimulants are necessary for achieving hedonism.

Roughly speaking, hedonic contents involve pleasure/enjoyment/satisfaction, and comfort/painlessness/ease. These variables are associated with contents representing certain mindsets, including a focus on the self, the present moment, and the tangible, and a focus on taking and consuming what one needs and wants (Huta, 2015: 2).

On the other hand, eudaimonia implies complete pleasure over an extended time, based on inner peace or tranquility. However, besides personal satisfaction, eudaimonia infers a larger context – the well-being of society and the environment. It is suggested that eudaimonia implies several factors:

...[F]our contents [of eudaimonia] appeared in most or all definitions: meaning/value/relevance to a broader context, personal growth/self-realization /maturity, excellence/ethics/quality, and authenticity/autonomy/integration. These variables are associated with certain mindsets, including a balance of focusing on the self and others, a balance of focusing on the present and the future, a tendency to be guided by abstract and big-picture concepts, and a focus on cultivating and building what one values and envisions (Huta, 2015: 2).

Although there are various understandings of well-being, eudaimonia and hedonism, it is certain that hedonism as a counterpart of eudaimonia is a significant part of one's well-being. However, we cannot completely accept that well-being consists of clearly separated eudaimonia and hedonism. As Huta claims an individual “may derive a hedonic benefit but a eudaimonic loss from an activity, and vice versa” (Huta, 2015: 2). Hedonism and eudaimonia are not entirely divided, but intertwined and can influence each other.

Despite opposed and often divergent characterizations of a happy and comfortable life, all the abovementioned philosophical schools had something in common: the adequate and specific place where the lectures and discussions were held. Plato's “Academy”, Aristoteles's “Liceum” and Epicureans' “Garden” were not only glaring examples of places where philosophy was practised but also the places where the entire life of a polis was happening. The reason for that lies in the fact that often tacitly and implicitly, the place where people had lived and worked represented necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for pleasant and comfortable living.

In addition, as Ambler claims, Aristotle thought that every city exists by nature. Not only that he thought that the polis was crucial for people living there, but he also considered its existence as natural, spontaneous, and even default:

Every city exists by nature; the city grows out of earlier associations and is their culmination (telos); it is a better association than they are; indeed, it is a complete (or, "perfect," *teleios*) association; it is self-sufficient and exists for the sake of the good life; it is especially suited for human beings, for man is by nature a political animal; it is by nature prior to both household and human being; man's relation to the city is that of part to whole; man is completed or perfected in the city; man when separated from law and judgment is the worst of the animals (Ambler, 1985: 165).

Aristotle insisted that self-sufficiency³ is of tremendous value for the polis, and to achieve it, it was necessary to fulfil certain conditions. Culture, science and art were extremely prominent and highly valued, so many ancient Greeks were very much engaged in theatre, philosophy, mathematics, sculpture, and sports. Also, participating in democratic decision-making, public debates and philosophical lectures and discussions were a matter of general education.

A city-state which controlled the source or supply of some much-needed raw material, such as gold, marble or timber, might be said to owe its political independence to its economic position, yet could not be called "self-sufficient" if it did not contain within its own borders the bare means of subsistence for its inhabitants (Wheeler, 1955: 416).

II

Similarly, contemporary city's self-sufficiency is based not only on economic and political pillars but on social and cultural as well. These immaterial values of cities have been well documented in the literature by Baudelaire, Benjamin, de Certeau, and others, who emphasised the significance of simply walking around the city, absorbing impressions, using all senses and interacting with other people. However, we must avoid getting into the trap of urban-centrism and class blindness when delineating the distinctions between ancient and modern societies. While cities undoubtedly play a significant role in contemporary life, they neither represent the sole nor the superior form of human habitation. Villages, small towns, and rural communities

³ Aristotle's concept of self-sufficiency is very well explained and analyzed in Eric Brown's article "Aristotle on the Choice of Lives: Two Concepts of Self-Sufficiency". He argues that "self-sufficiency requires being an independent self and being sufficient of having enough". Both designations (characteristics) are important for our paper, especially the second one. Having enough is not just connected with material well-being, but also with an adequate way of living, which certainly includes proper space and place.

equally contribute to the social fabric, offering distinctive perspectives on well-being and communal life. By broadening our scope beyond urban areas, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how different social structures influence individual and collective well-being. Therefore, in comparing the ancient polis with modern cities, it is imperative not to overlook the diverse socioeconomic realities present within and across these environments. Urban areas frequently display high levels of socioeconomic inequality, with marginalized communities facing obstacles in accessing essential resources and opportunities. On the contrary, ancient Greek city-states potentially cultivated a more egalitarian ethos within their comparatively modest populations. Consequently, any comparison between ancient and modern societies must account for the complexities of class dynamics and socioeconomic disparities to avoid oversimplification and misinterpretation.

Some instances of these similarities have been recognised in terms of urban planning – how the components of cities have been embedded and used (Smith, 2010; Hutson and Welch, 2021). In addition, there are significant similarities exhibited through a theory called urban or settlement scaling in archaeology, developed to determine whether ancient cities are relevant to contemporary urban studies (Ortman et al., 2015). Some research demonstrated that urban scaling—a set of laws that govern how cities grow—was used in both ancient and modern times. According to these laws, when urban populations increase over time, individuals congregate closely rather than disperse widely. Some proofs found in Medieval Europe, the pre-Hispanic Basin of Mexico, the Inca Empire and the Roman Empire, might suggest that these dynamics could be explained by human agglomeration rather than through institutions or by using technologies (Mandich, 2019).

Thus, how do contemporary scholars approach constant, still, fluid connections between places and the people who produce and use them? In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) claims that spatial existence is the primary condition of all living perception, which implies that people are immersed in a place. People are born and raised in places, they live in places, transform places and eventually die in places that undisturbedly continue to exist without them. This entire process happens in a time – a sense of temporality being the most important link between people and places (May and Thrift, 2001: 1-46). We need time with its longitudinal perspective to understand how urban environments evolved through exploring historical trajectories, long-term effects, and social and cultural dynamics that shaped urban environments and consequently, their impact on human well-being. This obvious relation between space and time has been also researched by German scholar Schlögel (Schlögel, 2009), who speaks about reading time *in* space. His remarks endeavour to circumvent the rigid geographical and historical narratives by placing them into a multidimensional juxtaposition. He also claims that events “take place”, and that history happens not only in time but in a particular place as well.

Nevertheless, what defines activities and events in a certain place? Foucault believed that neither the place nor the built, architectural objects within it have the power to fully determine the activities happening there (Foucault, 1980). Koolhaas is even more explicit by claiming that people can inhabit anything, regardless of the architecture, and be happy and miserable anywhere (Heron, 1996). Undoubtedly, events and behaviours strongly depend on the social reality and the context in which they take place. Events are continually appraised in light of feelings and meanings associated with them. Due to past events that cannot be forgotten but are instead used to guide people's decisions and actions in the future, memory plays a key part in the construction of a place (Nora, 1996). Similarly, Christopher Alexander, an architect and design-theorist confirms the importance of activities and events of a place by describing values and principles of physical design, which focuses less on the structure of objects and cities, and more on the life in them: "Those of us who are concerned with buildings tend to forget too easily that all the life and soul of a place, all of our experiences there, depend not simply on the physical environment, but on the pattern of events which we experience there" (Alexander et al, 1997: 62).

When it comes to the ancient events in cities, Greeks were organizing religious festivals not only to express gratitude to their revered deities and heroes, but also as a method of articulating and disseminating civic ideology and the collective identity of their citizens. These festivals served as a means to validate political institutions and social frameworks. Additionally, sporting and musical events played a central role in the advancement of polis and the establishment of their legal and political systems.

Most of the mentioned events took place at the ancient *agora* (αγορά) - a multifunctional space that played a vital role in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the Greek polis. It was a lively centre of activity and interaction, shaping the collective identity and destiny of the community it served. The academic concepts around the production of similar places were born much later, in the 1960s when authors like Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1992) and William H. Whyte (Whyte, 2001) offered groundbreaking ideas about designing cities for people. Their work focused mostly on the importance of dynamic neighbourhoods and appealing public spaces. Jacobs emphasized the vitality of diverse communities and the need for mixed-use development to foster social interaction and safety, while Whyte explored urban behaviour, highlighting the significance of small-scale urban spaces in enhancing the quality of urban life. Their work set the foundation for contemporary placemaking practices that prioritize human experiences and community well-being. Lefebvre also spoke of the agora and its role in building urban life through the shared experiences of citizens, while later on, these traditional places of assembly became marketplaces, where a commodity is supposed to be bought and sold (Lefebvre, 1996).

III

These were only the beginnings of academic interest in placemaking and the importance of the interaction between places and people. Today, more than half of a century later, when we witness rapid and radical urban transformations turning rare empty spaces into crowded places; landscapes being enduringly changed or destroyed; and green areas often turned into grey ones (Iguman, 2021), we need to rethink city design.

More and more urban planners, architects and other scholars tend to create cities that are good for people's physical health, but also for their state of mind, cosines and finally, well-being and happiness. This would imply tending to achieve the *locus amoenus*, which means an idealized place of safety or comfort that includes three basic elements: trees, grass, and water. We can see from the recent global initiatives the importance of such "idealizing" places – The New European Bauhaus initiative⁴ insists on creating places that are beautiful for our eyes, mind and soul. To achieve this, places should be responding to the needs beyond functionality, through art and culture (enriching); in harmony with nature (sustainable) and inclusiveness (encouraging).

Each place with its material and immaterial characteristics defines the way people interact with it – how they identify that place, but also how they identify themselves in relation to that place. This process can be individual and collective and it can refer to different scales – from local, to national. In this process, complex sentiments are involved, such as place attachment, place identity and place dependence (Grimshaw and Mates, 2022).

However, these processes are disturbed by the invasion of an indifferent sameness-of-place on a global scale, to the point where sometimes people cannot be certain in identifying the cities they are located in, considering the overwhelming uniformity of structures based on the Western aesthetic, economic, social and political paradigms. This is particularly problematic when we speak of a *sense of place*, that emphasizes the relation between people and spatial settings, where spaces are considered neutral, empty entities, while places represent their portions that are created through cultural, historical, and technological processes.

As previously noted, the trend towards creating standardized and homogenized cities poses significant challenges, particularly in countries with neoliberal tendencies. The privatization of goods and the proliferation of radical, unsustainable, and in some cases even illegal construction often result in an excessive number of commercial and residential structures, followed by a scarcity of public spaces and services. In such contexts, citizens' disillusionment fuels their quest for well-being, which they often

⁴ European Union "New European Bauhaus" (https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en)

demonstrate on the streets, while investors and political stakeholders wield considerable influence in society.

If we suggest that spatial existence forms the fundamental basis of all perceptual experience, we inherently challenge the notion that well-being—often conceptualized in philosophy as that which is intrinsically or ultimately beneficial for an individual—is directly correlated with their environment. But how to determine what is *good* for a person? “To one person it is wilderness, to another, it is ski lodges for thousands... Comparing one good with another is rather impossible because goods are incommensurable. Incommensurables cannot be compared” (Hardin, 1968). Thus, approaching the concept of well-being requires great sensitivity, as the modernization and transformation of a particular place can evoke disparate opinions even within a single community.

Here, an important segment of well-being – self-interest – enters the discourse. Although well-being and self-interest might be mutually exclusive concepts, this is not entirely the case. Even though the term well-being is used in a broad sense, it also refers to a person’s own (egoistic) desires. Usually, people perceive happiness as a personal accomplishment, which frequently conflicts with the greater good. If everyone would behave in such an egotistic manner, the common good would be overlooked. Egoistic interests dominate human behaviour to the point where people forget the essence of the common good and slip into a state of callous egoism that disregards the needs of other humans.

If this dynamic develops, egoistic hedonism could be fatal both for the environment and for humans consequently. If we assemble the fact that we live in a consumerist, capitalist and materialistic society in which selfishness seems desirable, and the false notion that selfishness is a prerequisite for achieving personal well-being, we neglect the larger social picture. One of the basic assumptions of materialism is that material possessions lead to happiness, which even Epicurus saw as a fallacy. Taking care of and fulfilling exclusively our desires and satisfying our vanity, we lose touch with the community. In addition, many contemporary studies have shown that materialism is negatively correlated with well-being, i.e., “materialism is negatively associated with both life satisfaction and happiness and positively associated with such negative affective states as depression and neuroticism” (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002: 350). Excessive focus on one’s desires reduces or even eliminates awareness of the needs of others or the whole of society. In this sense, materialistic values exclude community-oriented values, by neglecting or ignoring emphatic psychological traits, such as kindness, collaboration, understanding, compassion and so on. If the goal is to constantly keep achieving more wealth, then it is not unusual for all natural resources to be misused for private purposes, and for the benefit of individuals who own capital.

2. Conclusion

Well-being holds paramount importance for the flourishing of societies. Throughout this paper, we have demonstrated how ancient civilizations, such as those of ancient Greece, prioritized the physical and mental well-being of their citizens, recognizing that individual prosperity was intertwined with the prosperity of the community as a whole. To achieve this, it was necessary to harmonize the personal ethical moment, i.e., egoism, with the needs of the community, or to equilibrate personal desires and the greater good. Therefore, adjusting individual desires and wishes to various generally useful postulates presupposes their inhibition, control and rationalization. However, what we wanted to show is that this does not mean degrading or belittling the individual, but on the contrary, allowing ourselves to see the need for a commonplace, which enables living in an incomparably more pleasurable place. Looking back at Aristotle's and Epicurus' understanding, we tried to show that the human intrinsic need for pleasures or hedonism is not merely one of many human weaknesses that should be curbed, suppressed or even eliminated. Accordingly, to enjoy life, it is not enough to fulfil only personal preferences. Rather, it is necessary to harmonize them with the needs of the entire community.

We live in the so-called Anthropocene – the epoch of radical, unstoppable urbanization, nature transformation, and political, economic and social turbulences in every corner of our planet, with extremely limited, diminishing resources and public goods. Hence, balancing between individual needs and those of the entire community has become more difficult than ever. Therefore, we think it is crucial to rethink urban planning to soften the dichotomy between individual and communal needs. This raises a significant question of whether this is even possible. Furthermore, should an affirmative response be attained, it inevitably begets a host of challenges, for delineating the methodology of *how to do that* therein entails a far more intricate and demanding endeavour. We revisited ideas central to ancient philosophical debates about well-being in a city, and discussed contemporary concepts that have evolved from these ancient roots, trying to suggest a potential framework for reimagining urban futures.

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Antički polis kao plodno tlo za promišljanje suvremenih ugodnih prostora

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Sažetak

Tekst se bavi suvremenim, dinamičnim odnosom ljudi i mjesta u kojima žive, fokusirajući se na relativne filozofske koncepte – eudemonizam i hedonizam – kako bi se razumjelo ono što danas podrazumijevamo pod pojmom blagostanja. Nadalje, ovaj rad istražuje Sokratovu i Platonovu vjeru da je polis (antički grad-država) značajan društveni fenomen, daleko važniji od pojedinaca koji u njemu žive. Temeljeći se na ovoj pretpostavci, rad istražuje složeni odnos između individualnog i kolektivnog blagostanja unutar suvremenih urbanih konteksta. Tanana granica između hedonizma i osobnog interesa istražuje se u suvremenom urbanom okviru - onom individualističkom, potrošačkom i materijalističkom, s ograničenim i zajedničkim prostorima i resursima.

Zaključno, ovaj rad zagovara preispitivanje antičkog grčkog polisa kao izvora inspiracije za promišljanje urbane budućnosti, integrirajući povijesnu mudrost sa suvremenim praksama urbanog planiranja kako bi se potaknulo stvaranje pravednijih, održivijih i ispunjavajućih urbanih okruženja.

Ključne riječi: grad, eudemonizam, hedonizam, mjesto, polis, blagostanje.