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Wittingslow, Ryan

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Chapter 13

Authenticity and the ‘Authentic City’



Ryan Mitchell Wittingslow

Abstract In this paper, I argue that the benefits that smart cities purport to provide cohere poorly with a number of our shared phenomenological intuitions about the relationships(s) between authentic experience and technologised society. While many of these intuitions are, strictly speaking, pseudo-problems, they deserve our attention. These issues will only grow more pressing as our ‘dumb cities’, already so opaque to experience, give way to hyper-technologised ‘smart cities’. However, it is possible to design our way out of these pseudo-problems. Assuming we accept my argument that the distinction between authenticity and the device paradigm is premised upon a certain kind of category error, there is no categorical or definitional reason why it is not possible for urbanised, technologised spaces to feel authentic, whether by virtue of their aesthetic properties, or because they facilitate ‘authentic’ behaviour. Indeed, I argue that ‘inauthenticity’ is an aesthetic rather than an ontological category (much like ‘ugliness’, or ‘boring-ness’), with feelings of inauthenticity serving as evidence of a basic failure of design. Redressing these failures of design requires that we adopt a novel approach to the design and use of technical objects. Consequently, in the concluding analysis of the chapter I outline how the feeling of authenticity can be invoked in the smart city and, consequently, how these failures of design can be avoided.

Keywords Borgmann · Authenticity · Urbanism · Postphenomenology · Smart cities

R. M. Wittingslow (✉)

University College Groningen, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

e-mail: r.m.wittingslow@rug.nl

13.1 Introduction

On paper, ‘smart cities’ are an easy sell. Thanks to the transformative power of information and communication technologies (the much-vaunted ‘internet of things’), smart cities purport to offer managers and bureaucrats a more harmonious and efficient means of reducing traffic, managing assets, and increasing public safety. Proponents hope that these cities will demonstrate the utility of measuring and mapping human behaviour in a manner that is both large-scale and fine-grained, rather than relying on the rough-hewn predictive models of yesteryear. However, I am dubious of these utopian sentiments. Indeed, I argue that the benefits that smart cities purport to provide cohere poorly with a number of compelling phenomenological intuitions about technologised urban spaces, in this case as expressed by Albert Borgmann.

While I think that Borgmann makes an excellent case, I make clear that many of these intuitions are, strictly speaking, pseudo-problems premised upon the assumption that “authenticity” possesses an ontological character. However, while these intuitions may be errors, due to their undeniable resonance, they also deserve our attention. The belief that technologised urban spaces somehow corrode our potential for authentic experience is one that carries enormous power; as Charles Taylor argues, authenticity is nothing less than the contemporary moral ideal (1991, p. 17). Consequently, it indelibly colours the relationships that we forge with our artefacts. These issues will only grow more pressing as our ‘dumb cities’, already so opaque to experience, give way to hyper-technologised ‘smart cities’. Thankfully, it is possible to design our way out of these pseudo-problems.

Assuming we accept my argument that the distinction between authenticity and the device paradigm is premised upon the afore-mentioned error, there is no categorical or definitional reason why it is not possible for urbanised, technologised spaces to feel authentic, whether by virtue of their aesthetic properties, or because they facilitate ‘authentic’ behaviour. Indeed, I argue that ‘authenticity’ is an aesthetic rather than an ontological category (much like ‘beauty’, or ‘sublimity’), and that feelings of inauthenticity are less ontological warnings than they are evidence of a basic failure of design. Redressing these failures of design requires that we adopt a novel approach to the design and use of technical objects—and particularly when these objects are the almost invisible, semi-autonomous constituents of the ‘smart city’.

Consequently, in the concluding analysis of the chapter I develop Barry Allen’s notions of ‘technical coherence’ and ‘aesthetic presence’, in conjunction with Don Ihde’s post-phenomenological work on technical relations, to outline how the feeling of authenticity can be invoked in the smart city and, consequently, how these failures of design can be avoided.

13.2 Things and Devices

Borgmann has, throughout his career, given a frank assessment of the anomie that he believes exists at the heart of Western civilisation. Responsible for this regrettable state of affairs are our relationships to the technologies we develop and employ: an invisible system of devices that lurks like a vast, silent monster beneath the world of phenomenological experience. Befitting his Heideggerian inheritance, Borgmann differentiates these 'devices' from more benign 'things': a distinction broadly analogous to the one Heidegger poses between *Gegenstände* and *Dinge*. Under this rubric, 'things' are those entities whose functions, operations, and applications are transparent to intuition. It is obvious what authentic things are *for*, in that they "tend to include in their appearance the invisible presence of what is needed to fulfil their function" (Arnheim, 1969, p. 89): in being phenomenologically available to intuition and experience they, if you like, wear their thing-ness on their sleeves. We can identify five features common to Borgmann's things (1984):

1. Things are *difficult*, in that they require a certain amount of labour in order to function properly. Using a fireplace, for example, is only possible if we are willing to find, chop, stack, and burn wood.
2. Things *take time to use*. Heating our homes with a fireplace incurs a temporal toll in addition to the impost of labour.
3. Things are not *safe*, either in use or design. Using a thing requires skill, and incurs a certain amount of risk. An incompetent woodcutter could, for example, chop off his fingers or burn down her house.
4. Things are *localised*. When we use a fireplace, it only heats the room in which the fireplace is situated.
5. Things are *available to intuition*. The means of use and mechanisms of action of things are perceivable and understandable, and do not require specialised knowledge to appreciate.

As a consequence of exhibiting these five features, things are necessarily 'focal' ('focus' is Latin for 'hearth'); they serve as phenomenological loci or anchors for shared activity. For the fireplace was the focal point of everyday activity in the pre-industrial home: the place where cooking, heating and interpersonal exchanges took place, and the designated space for the Roman house gods. Borgmann attempts to reclaim this pre-industrial use of 'focus', arguing that focal points are those locations like the pre-device paradigm hearth: a central point around which human beings engage in practices that "center, orient and enlighten our lives" (Tijmes, 2001, p. 22). These practices are unquantifiable: although we can place an explicit dollar value on the amount of hamburgers sold at a fast food restaurant in any given period, we cannot do the same for a family meal "thoughtfully prepared and celebrated at home" (Borgmann, 1984, p. 56). These things and practices serve to provide context for our lived experiences, whether it be via physical labour, meaningful social interaction or experiencing the unmediated trappings of nature (1984, pp. 190–191). While things do not offer up their goods without difficulty, they facilitate an appreciation and

understanding of the richly-textured fabric of our social lives and our places within the world. In a method analogous to the Heideggerian process of *aletheia*, or ‘revealing’ (Heidegger, 1977), things *disclose* the world, making it clear for us. This is manifest in the necessarily shared and phenomenologically full experience of encountering things as they function; we can easily imagine a family eating and talking in front of the fireplace after a long day of fruitful and fulfilling activity (1984, p. 42). As a consequence of these factors, there is something seemingly (and seemingly profoundly) *authentic* about Borgmann’s things.

Amidst the complication of conditions, of the *Bedingungen*, we must uncover the simplicity of things, of the *Dinge*. A jug, an earthen vessel from which we pour wine, is such a thing. It teaches us what it is to hold, to offer, to pour and to give. In its clay, it gathers for us the earth as it does in containing the wine that has grown from the soil. It gathers the sky whose rain and sun are present in the wine. It refreshes and animates us in our mortality. And in the libation it acknowledges and calls on the divinities (2003, pp. 294–295).

Meanwhile, devices are technological solutions that liberate us from the physical and temporal tolls levied by things; unlike things, they are easy, instantaneous, safe, and ubiquitous. Thanks to an aggregation of technical systems, we are no longer required to heat our homes by the chopping and burning of wood. Instead, we can instead adjust the temperature on our thermostats, and let our radiators do all the work. Devices also offer opportunities that things do not. These immensely complex aggregations of technical systems enable us to perform tasks that would be categorically impossible with only the aid of things. For example, whereas a fireplace serves as the ‘thing-analogue’ for a hot water radiator, there is no thing-analogue for a computed tomography (CT) scanner. There is no phenomenologically rich thing that allows us to so readily look inside objects (such as human beings) without intruding with pins and scalpels.

However, Borgmann argues, there is a catch. While devices are very good at both meeting basic needs or desires, as well as providing services that things cannot, the mechanisms by which they function are opaque to intuition and experience. Warmed by the hot water radiators in our homes, we are not cognisant of the byzantine network of plumbing that lies just beneath the bricks or plasterboard, let alone the dams or desalination plants from which the water is ultimately claimed from the natural world. Central heating, like all devices, is an example of the “conjunction of an easily available commodity and a sophisticated and impenetrable machinery” (Borgmann, 2000, p. 420). With the prevalence of hot water radiators and ducted heating, one need not even be tied to a specific location in order to find oneself warmed; the process has been abstracted to the point where *place* no longer relevantly bears upon the experience of being heated. In the case of hot a water radiator the focus is upon delivering heat, whilst the device itself *withdraws from view*.

As a consequence of this process of withdrawal, Borgmann argues that we are unable to interface with devices such as central heating systems with the same degree of richness that we would with a fireplace. Instead, our relationship with a thermostat is strictly instrumental, transactive, and context-free. Moreover, the tenor of this relationship is common across all devices: while devices in many respects make our lives better, they do not and cannot offer the phenomenological, authentic

plenary offered by things, nor can they facilitate focal practices. Due to the preponderance of devices, Borgmann claims that we have lost the taste for things. Rather than fulsomely encountering authentic things and engaging in authentic practices, we have begun to treat the world, the things that constitute it, and other people as if *they too* are devices: objects only to be considered in terms of their utility (economic, labour, or otherwise), rather than in terms of any other values they may have. This instrumental attitude, in so many words, is the device paradigm.

Given the tenor of Borgmann's criticism of the device paradigm, it is unsurprising that analyses of urban spaces feature in his later work, particularly *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*.¹ A city—even a traditional 'dumb city', as distinct from the smart city—is itself a kind of enormous device: a concatenation of nested apparatuses and densely intertwined civic, commercial, public, and private systems. However, Borgmann argues, while cities may be devices, they need not participate in the device paradigm assuming that they encourage authenticity and focality in civic, social, and artefactual practices. While the specific methods by which focality can be encouraged are obviously and necessarily sensitive to local conditions, focal urban spaces are united in offering what Andrew Light calls 'thick' experiences (Light 2005, p. 112). These experiences, while not always pleasant or safe, offer socially and phenomenologically rich interaction: the joyful buzz of a village square on market day; the democratic belligerence of a town hall meeting; the myriad of small interactions one undergoes when popping down to the post office to collect a parcel. While not necessarily *convenient*, these experiences help render urban spaces both parseable and navigable.

Unfortunately, however, urban design over the last century has failed to facilitate focal experiences thanks to design norms that privilege commercial activity at the expense of collective action, induce psychological and personal atomisation, and serve to collapse the 'public' into the 'social' (c.f.: Arendt, 1998, pp. 38–49). Borgmann writes: "Mixed-used skyscrapers and carefully designed urban malls are self-centered little universes that turn their backs on the real city. Thoughtful observers find these constructions controlled, contrived, artificial, and superficial" (1992, p. 130). Instead of the vitality and risk of the public square, we are insulated from one another via a spongiform mass of devices. Services and experiences—food, recreation, social interaction—that we once had to seek outside the bounds of our homes can now be piped in, painlessly and without effort. While the universe of consumption stitches together in a Frankenstein's monster of overlapping services, our social universes—even in traditional dumb cities—become atomised and profoundly inauthentic. Or, as Borgmann writes:

We live in self-imposed exile from communal conversation and action. The public square is naked. American politics has lost its soul. The republic has become procedural, and we have

¹In this work Borgmann refers to cities as being either 'real' or 'hyperreal'. However, I agree with Andrew Light's view that the "real-hyperreal distinction does not do any work that the device paradigm does not; instead, the old distinction should be have applied more straightforwardly" (Light 2005, p. 128). Consequently, I take Borgmann's urban hyperreal to be equivalent to the device paradigm.

become unencumbered selves. Individualism has become cancerous. We live in an age of narcissism and pursue loneliness. (1992, p. 3).

Moreover, given Borgmann's clear pessimism about the effects that information and communication technologies (ICT) have upon our capacity for authentic experience, it seems that the smart city presents an even greater threat to focality and authentic experience: "information technology is currently the prominent and most influential version of the device paradigm" (1999, p. 352). In *Holding on to Reality* Borgmann argues that 'technological' information, as distinct from focal 'natural' or 'cultural' information, inherently functions within the device paradigm. Instead of being tied to world, society, and circumstance like natural or cultural information, technological information is a formal simulation of the world: information presented *as* reality, rather than as *part of* reality. Indeed, when our informational map of the world becomes so accurate and finely-grained as to be treated as if it were itself the territory, it will, Borgmann claims, 'overflow and suffocate reality' (1999, p. 213). Consequently, and assuming that we accept this story, Borgmann's claims have profound ramifications for the smart city as, it seems, it is categorically incompatible with focal practices—and thus, with authenticity.

'Authenticity' is no mere cavil. Indeed, for many of us in the early twenty-first century, 'authenticity' is nothing less than an ideal form of life; a perfect mode of being. Just as Heidegger's *Dinge* are objects busily engaged in the activity of being themselves, for a human being to act authentically she must do the same: she is required to act for herself in a universe comprised of things acting for themselves. However, unlike other things, the phenomenologically authentic is free to deny her own nature; it is always our choice to affirm or reject the demands made upon us by our being. Consequently, authenticity has a profoundly normative dimension: the authentic seeks the form of life that best nourishes her, allowing her to flourish. Moreover, it is not simply enough that it nourish her; rather, there is a distinct implication that there is a *single best means* of nourishment. The spectre of Borgmann's authenticity calls to us, beckons us to act in accordance with some kind of internally-held but objectively-the-case standard of wellbeing. To refuse is to act in bad faith; it is a means of denying the very thing that she should be. Consequently, as an ethic, Borgmann's authenticity is both eudaimonic and teleological. The 'authentic' person flourishes best when participating in the right kinds of practices; practices determined by the demands of the natural world: "Nothing so engages the fullness of human capabilities as a coherent and focused world of natural information" (Borgmann, 1999, p. 219). It only is when she successfully acts in harmony with those demands that the authentic person actually succeeds in achieving authenticity.

At this particular moment in the early twenty-first century, Borgmann's authenticity functions as an object of common desire; indeed, and as noted in the introduction, Charles Taylor argues that authenticity might just be the contemporary moral ideal: "many people feel *called* to do this [the authentic act], feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn't do it" (1991, p. 17). Moreover, because authenticity is an object of common desire, it has become imbued with an undeniable cultural and economic cachet. Certain goods are marketed on the

basis that they can instrumentally precipitate an authentic life in the owners of those objects. The advertising of authenticity succeeds when it convinces punters that the products or services in question will *complete* them in some profound, ontological way. What is being sold is a picture of the world where everyone is perfect and everything has its right place; all of the moving parts work in such a way as to help us realise our apotheoses. It's a marvellous piece of legerdemain: the object of desire is entirely intangible. Being intangible, authenticity is not a fungible asset. It has no explicit economic value, nor can it be isolated or traded. However, despite having no explicit economic value, it is by no means *valueless*; to the contrary, authenticity is a concept that commands extraordinary social and cultural value. Indeed, phenomenological authenticity is an object of aspiration, and we admire those who we believe manage to achieve it—after all, to live an authentic life means that you're somehow living *properly*, having escaped the spiny thickets of civil society and late capitalism.

13.3 A Suspect Ontology

On this level of description, Borgmann's picture of authenticity looks unproblematic. However, cracks start to appear when we look closely at some of the tacit assumptions that underpin this model. As noted previously, there is something deeply teleological about Borgmann's authenticity. Our being—our *Dasein*, if you like—reaches for authenticity like a forest sapling grows towards the sun. While we are free to refuse the demands made of us by authenticity, we can only achieve the best possible life when we act in accordance with those pressures. This, in so many words, constitutes 'human nature': we are ontologically united by an intrinsic need for rustic simplicity, hard work, and fulsome community practices, rather than constant motion and the hyperactive manipulation of devices. This understanding of human nature paints a distinctly Heideggerian picture of the human that is fundamentally absent any kind of sophisticated technology: one premised upon an ontological distinction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' behaviours, with focal practices in the former category, and device-driven practices firmly in the latter.² We should be suspicious of these sorts of intuitions, and not only because any posed distinction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' reeks of a crude Aristotelianism that is "no longer connected with ontological claims", in the words of Jürgen Habermas (2003, p. 44). Indeed, even were that distinction to obtain, it fails to engage with the fact that, insofar as humans have an ontological character, it is one that is necessarily and categorically technologised, regardless of whether those technologies are 'things' or 'devices'.

Barry Allen, in *Knowledge and Civilization*, makes this point very clear. Although we might not think of ourselves as necessarily technologised creatures,

²Readers familiar with Heidegger will immediately see the parallels between Borgmann's implicature and Heidegger's ruminations on the hydroelectric plant (1977, p. 16).

he makes the case that technical culture comprises the evolutionary loam from which we have sprouted. From before the beginnings of genus *Homo*, humans have been crafting tools with other tools, creating a dense economy of complementary, mutually contingent artefacts that are united by a common grammar. By example, by smashing two rocks together I can make a sharper rock; with that sharper rock I can kill a deer; with that deer I can make clothes to keep me warm and delicious food to eat. Allen argues that our artefacts do not make sense unless embedded within a matrix of other, complementary tools: a needle cannot be used as a needle without a thread; a mobile phone cannot be used as a mobile phone without a satellite; a microwave dinner is going to taste even more like cardboard without a microwave. Moreover, this economy of artefacts is not only of interest in terms of material culture. Allen, citing Roy Rappaport, argues that this technological economy is the source of everything else that makes us human, too—including, potentially the development of language, ethical norms, aesthetic preferences, and whatever forms of life that we practice: “[we] are necessarily constituted by our technology, for our technology is that which facilitates that other necessary condition for humanhood: the ability to use and navigate symbolic references in a systematic and intelligible way” (Wittingslow, 2016, p. 134). In short, technology is a necessary precondition for culture.³ Allen writes:

[Technical] culture [...] is as old as the genus *Homo*, as old as language, or protolanguage, or ritual, and much older than our belated species, for whom it has become as indispensable as fresh water. The culture of artifacts is bred in our bones; we are *born* to culture; for us culture is nature (2005, pp. 218–219).

This picture also maps onto the archaeological record. According to estimates based upon the rate of phonemic diversity expressed in a number of test languages, full-blown language use in humans developed somewhere between 150,000 and 350,000 years ago (Perreault & Mathew, 2012, p. 5). Meanwhile, the very earliest Australopithecine stone tools—tools made of other tools, already fully embedded within an economy of artefacts—are dated much earlier, at approximately 2.6 million years ago (Plummer, 2004, p. 118). This indicates that technology has been with use two million years before the development of language, and 2.5 million years before the evolution of anatomically modern humans. This is what Allen means when he says we are ‘born’ to technology: the very first *Homo sapiens* arrived already technologised, already linguistic, and already fully acculturated, embedded in the dense economy of complementary, mutually contingent artefacts of our ancestors.

Allen’s scholarship also has interesting parallels with that of Bernard Stiegler: a thinker much more closely aligned with the Heideggerian tradition to which Borgmann belongs. Stiegler, like Allen, is also interested in the mutually constituting relationship with humankind and our tools. He considers the birth of mankind as something that emerges from the process of interfacing with the material of our

³Readers interested in the details of this claim should consult (Allen, 2005, pp. 189–203) and (Rappaport, 1979).

first tools: a union of eye and hand and stone. In acting upon the world, he argues, we find our own mind speaking to us. This capacity obliquely reflects itself, "somber, buried, freeing itself from the shadows like a statue out of a block of marble" (1998, p. 141): where we find our own internal intentions marked upon the world, though necessarily limited by the external facts that the world imposes. The creation of the first human is a paradox, for we speak of an exteriorisation (the first stone tool) without that exteriorisation being exterior to *something*, without an intelligent and intelligible homunculus having taken up residence behind one's eyes. Instead, echoing Allen's basic phenomenological point, the interior is constituted by that first tool-making act: "The movement inherent in this process of exteriorization is paradoxical: [...] it is the tool, that is, *tekhnē*, that invents the human, not the human who invents the technical. Or again: the human invents himself in the technical by inventing the tool—by becoming exteriorized techno-logically" (1998, p. 141). For Stiegler, humankind is defined by the tools we wield, but the tool itself is rendered impossible without the presence of the human. Supposing that one has an ontology independent of the other is both incoherent and impossible.⁴

While Borgmann's desire to separate us from our dense technological milieu and subsequently relocate human nature to a kind of rustic simplicity is undeniably appealing, his view that we will somehow lose touch with the natural world due to over-reliance on devices is frankly incompatible with the observation that we can *never* return to nature, un-technologised and naïve. It is, in short, a pseudo-problem, premised on a significant category error. This is what I mean when I say that, insofar as we have an ontological character, human beings are necessarily and categorically technologised. Existing in the world of our artefacts, whether things or devices, is as authentic to our being as we can possibly get. As Don Ihde writes: "it might be possible for humans to live non-technologically as a kind of abstract possibility [...]. But there is no such empirical-historical human form of life because, long before our remembering, humans moved from all gardens to inherit the Earth" (1990, p. 13). However, just because authenticity is not a meaningful ontological category does not mean that authenticity isn't important. To the contrary, I believe that the question of authenticity is profoundly important, particularly insofar as authenticity discourse influences the form and function—and, consequently, our experience—of designed objects and places. It's just that Heideggerians, such as Borgmann, are mistaken about the kind of thing that authenticity is. For authenticity, I argue, is not an ontological category at all; rather, it denotes a class of related experiences that are themselves parasitic upon a certain class of postphenomenological relations. Authenticity is, in short, an *aesthetic* category.

While much of the ink-spilling that occurs within philosophical aesthetics concerns the nature of the beautiful, 'beauty' is by no means the only aesthetic category. Outside of beauty, 'sublimity' is perhaps the category that has attracted the most

⁴"[Whereas] animals are positively endowed with qualities, it is *tekhnē* that forms the lot of humans, and *tekhnē* is prosthetic; that is, it is entirely artifice. The qualities of animals make up a sort of nature, in any case a positive gift of the gods: a predestination. The gift made to humanity is not positive: it is there to compensate" (Stiegler, 1998, p. 193).

scholarship, thanks in no small part to the philosophical spat between Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant in *Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and *The Critique of Judgement*, respectively. Furthermore, there are plausibly a great many additional categories: Albert Chandler, by example, identifies three categories in addition to the two already mentioned: the ‘tragic’, the ‘comic’, and the ‘interesting’ (1921); while Sianne Ngai identifies ‘interesting’, ‘zany’, and ‘cute’ (2010, 2015). Although I have no real interest in providing a complete taxonomy of aesthetic categories (a task that strikes me as both thankless and doomed to failure), I do think that the notion of an aesthetic category is an important one: it is obviously the case that objects or scenarios elicit qualitatively different kinds of aesthetic experiences.

Beauty, for instance (at least when discussed in a Kantian register), refers to a kind of disinterested yet pleasurable appraisal of formal and semantic features; a “delight consistent with reason”, in the words of John Dennis (1931, p. 381). The sublime, meanwhile, refers to experiences that exceed our capacity for reason: the agreeable sort of horror one feels when confronted with something “transcending every standard of sense” (Kant, 1969, p. 98). Less straightforward experiences, such as Matthew Kieran’s ‘grotesque’—referring to the “actual delight we feel in attending to repellent, ugly and incoherent artwork” (1997)—also potentially constitute categories, in that they too refer to qualitatively distinct aesthetic modes. Furthermore, rather than being essential or intrinsic to our being, aesthetic categories are fundamentally artefacts of acculturation, with the individually aesthetic instances that constitute those categories united only by family resemblance. This is why, for instance, we rightly recognise that the religious sublime of Burke and the Romantic sublime of Rainer Maria Rilke are qualitatively distinct, while at the same time expressing no qualms about describing them both as instances of sublimity. They are united only by a common sense that the human being is a small and incidental thing when considered against the power and size of the universe.⁵

Amidst this plethora of options, I claim that Borgmann’s ‘authentic’ also functions as an aesthetic category, rather than—as he claims—an ontological quality. In this manner, focality is simultaneously denuded and reinvigorated: rather than being saddled with groundless Heideggerian intuitions about the teleology of *Dasein*, authenticity describes a family relation of aesthetic experiences, united by a common pleasure in hard work, community, and simple things. It, unlike the disinterested appreciation of beauty, or the giddy terror of sublimity, or the carnivalesque and ironic smirk of the grotesque, is a kind of aesthetic pleasure derived from fulsome, phenomenologically rich, personally and/or socially gratifying activities. In short, the aesthetic category of authenticity is comprised of the experiences of focal practices. Furthermore, we should not be dogmatic about what constitutes a focal practice and what does not. The truth of authenticity is in the feeling of it, in the profound sense of phenomenological engagement. Whereas Borgmann categorises

⁵“For beauty is nothing/but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure, / and we are so awed because it serenely disdains/to annihilate us” (Rilke, 2014, p. 3).

certain activities as either focal or non-focal, we can be a little more generous and claim that focality can emerge in all manner of places, and in all kinds of unexpected ways. Even the mere act of drinking water can stimulate the sense of authentic engagement, assuming the correct circumstances:

To drink water from a waxed paper cup on the highway and to drink it from a crystal goblet are different gestures. In the first case, you almost forget that you exist as you drink. In the second, [...] you realize that you have in your hands an instrument that makes you reflect upon how you are living at that moment. (Ettore Sottsass, quoted in Grudin, 2010, p. 55).

Moreover, it is possible to design objects or events in such a manner as to induce experiences within the register of a given aesthetic category, even though these experiences are obviously underdetermined by the objects or events in question (one could fail to find a J. M. Turner painting sufficiently sublime, for example). So, were one seeking to make a sculpture that would induce experiences of beauty in viewers, they could do so by employing those methods that have previously succeeded in doing so: by guaranteeing elegance, or splendour, or charm, or delicacy. So it is with the case of authenticity. Consequently, it is here that the richness and usefulness of Borgmann's analysis really makes itself apparent. Whilst I profoundly disagree with his ontological claims, his sensitivity to the kinds of practices that human beings generally find existentially or spiritually fulfilling provides an excellent scaffold from which to examine the features common to experiences that we consider 'authentic'. To that end, we already know the five features that make things phenomenologically (or aesthetically) satisfying and, consequently, appropriate loci for focality: that is, they should be difficult, slow, unsafe, local, and intuitable. However, no longer constrained by Borgmann's ontological restrictions, we can loosen these requirements: now, they must only *seem* difficult, slow, unsafe, local, and intuitable. We must encounter them as if they offer up their gifts begrudgingly.⁶

Importantly, when authenticity is treated as an aesthetic category, there is no longer any categorical or ontological reason why it is impossible for urbanised, device-riddled spaces to feel authentic. Devices, inauthenticity, and non-focality are, for Borgmann, existentially threatening because they separate us from the fulsome-ness of the given. However, in clarifying that authenticity is an aesthetic preference rather than an ontological need, the stakes are entirely different to those that Borgmann implies: instead, inauthenticity becomes a solvable *design* challenge, rather than an insoluble ontological challenge. While good design can immeasurably improve the lives of users, and failures of design can make life immeasurably worse, we can at least take comfort in the fact that bad design does not impinge upon or corrode being itself. Of course, producing designed goods that are robustly

⁶A good Heideggerian would certainly disagree with my assumptions here. Contra my claim that that "the authentic" denotes a class of experiences, said Heideggerian might instead insist that Borgmann's five features are accidental attributes of authentic *Dinge* rather than additively constituting authenticity (c.f. Heidegger, 2008). Unfortunately, given the profound differences between my ontological assumptions and those of our hypothetical Heideggerian, I fear that this disagreement is intractable.

and satisfyingly focal is still profoundly important if we are to feel as if we are living authentically; it's just that we should not consider failure ontologically or existentially threatening.

13.4 Designing for Focality

In order to improve the lives of users, focal goods need to succeed on two fronts. The first is the same dimension in which all designed objects need to succeed: what Barry Allen describes as 'technical coherence', or "why things work" (2008, p. 97). Technical coherence is a measure of the extent to which a designed object does the job for which it was designed. A paperclip, for example, is technically coherent when it successfully holds together loose leaves of paper; a sewer system is technically coherent when it seamlessly and invisibly transports waste to a treatment plant. Meanwhile, if an object fails to perform as designed, then something in the design has failed: it is instead technically incoherent. The second front upon which focal goods need to succeed is what Allen calls 'aesthetic presence': why things "affect us, appeal to us, fascinate and delight us, make us linger, remember, and revisit" (2008, p. 97). Not all designed objects have aesthetic presence: Allen uses the examples of electrical power grids, drain systems, and nanotechnology as objects without presence that nonetheless exhibit technical coherence. These coherent but non-aesthetic goods can be described as 'non-focal' because they make no attempt at phenomenological participation: Borgmann's devices fall into this category. Meanwhile, objects that do have aesthetic presence are not only employed instrumentally; they are also themselves the objects of our attention because they possess distinct points of interface, facilitate phenomenologically rich activity, and exist at a human scale. Borgmann's things fall into, but do not exhaust, this category.

Unfortunately, Allen does not further develop his distinction between technical coherence and aesthetic presence. Nonetheless we can, by appealing to the post-phenomenological scholarship of Don Ihde, enrich this taxonomy. Ihde, in *Technology and the Lifeworld* argues that there are four fundamental kinds of technical relations: that is, relations that hold between humans and our artefacts. These relations are 'embodiment relations', 'hermeneutic relations', 'alterity relations', and 'background relations' (1990):

1. 'Embodiment' describes mediated technical relations wherein artefacts are integrated into our perceptual schemas. Eyeglasses provide relations of this type: I do not perceive the glasses themselves, but rather I perceive *through* them; they withdraw from my perception.
2. 'Hermeneutic' describes mediated technical relations wherein artefacts do not withdraw from our attention, as in embodiment relations, but rather reveal an aspect of the world that would have been hitherto inaccessible. Thermographic cameras provide relations of this type.

3. 'Alterity' describes unmediated technical relations wherein artefacts are themselves the object of attention: as a "quasi-other" (1990, p. 98). Spinning tops, books, gaming consoles, and automatic teller machines provide relations of this type.
4. 'Background' describes unmediated technical relations wherein we do not directly encounter the artefact at all. Instead, these artefacts provide and shape "the context of our experience in a way that is not consciously experienced" (Verbeek, 2001, p. 132). Borgmann's devices and Allen's coherent but non-aesthetic goods provide relations of this type.

Amongst these four types of relation, any of the artefacts participating in the first three types of relation can have aesthetic presence, in that they are directly experienced. However—and significantly—not all of those relations can facilitate focality, for the simple reason that only one of these relationships has the right kind of relationship with the world. Embodiment relations, by example, describe relations where the artefact integrates into the body seamlessly and pre-theoretically: it is broadly analogous to the Heideggerian *Zuhandenheit*, or 'readiness-to-hand'. The 'I' and 'technology' collapse into a single entity, united by what Ihde calls the 'enigma position'; consequently, it restores or amplifies human agency, but reveals nothing about the world itself. Alterity relations are similarly unable to reveal the world, in that the artefact itself is the object of attention and interaction and the world is rendered both marginal and silent. In hermeneutic relations, however, it is technology and world that is united at the enigma position: our artefacts provide novel means of perceiving and engaging with the world. Consequently, in pursuing hermeneutic relations, the groundwork is placed for focal goods to provide an aesthetic sense of *aletheia*, of world-disclosure—and thus, an aesthetic sense of authenticity.

This is why, for instance, we perceive imperfectly-made artisanal objects as being more authentic than perfectly-machined mass-produced objects. Focal goods appear created within the register of what David Pye called "the workmanship of risk", as opposed to the "workmanship of certainty". Pye characterises the workmanship of certainty as being the kind of workmanship presenting in quantity production, with its "pure state in full automation." Meanwhile, unlike the "exactly predetermined" results of the workmanship of certainty, the workmanship of risk describes the process of *craftsmanship*, wherein "the quality [...] depends on the judgement, dexterity and care that the maker exercises as he works" (1968, pp. 4–5). Furthermore, in bearing the marks of their production thanks to the workmanship of risk, focal goods also appear sensitive to the circumstances in which they were made—and indeed, seem to suggest the hermeneutic story of how they were made. Unlike the grim, industrial homogeneity of non-focal goods, focal goods interface with the realities of small scale production: the availability and specific qualities of local resources; prevailing aesthetic norms; receptivity to historical contingency and lived experience. Rather than pretending to meet universal human needs, they appear designed to meet individual, specific needs under local circumstances.

While I dispute the grounds on which Borgmann expresses his ontological concerns, I think his fundamental intuition is correct: first, that a great many human beings have an aesthetic preference for authenticity; second, that this aesthetic preference is both important and worth taking seriously; and third, that contemporary society is suffering a crisis of authenticity. Moreover, I think evidence for this preference being in place is remarkably easy to find. By example: according to the June 2015 issue of *Fortune*, in 2014 major packaged-food companies lost US\$4 billion in market share, with reports indicating that consumers were actively preferring fresh, organic products over their packaged counterparts. This was not an isolated hiccup, either; the top 25 food and beverage companies in the US have haemorrhaged some US\$18 billion dollars in lost sales since 2009 as a direct result of shifting consumer demands against perceived artificiality and towards perceived authenticity: “The search for authenticity has led organic food sales to more than triple over the past decade and increase 11% last year alone to \$35.9 billion” (Kowitz, 2015). This is but one example of a pattern that is manifest in all corners of consumer culture. Our motivations are basically Borgmannian as well. By buying bamboo laptop cases, organic vegetables, convenience-store kombucha, by celebrating urban beekeeping and the reinvigoration of Savile Row, we feel as if we are better able to return to some kind of idealised natural state. As Elizabeth Outka argues in *Consuming Traditions*, the commercial appeal of the authentic lies in its ostensive resistance to commercialism and the device-riddled life that commercialism seems to entail (2008).

Perversely, this collective desire for authenticity has catalysed the development of an homogeneous ‘authenticity aesthetic’: a set of formal properties shared in one form or another by items that aspire to authenticity (c.f.: Chayka, 2016). Although I shan’t exhaustively list these properties here, they’re immediately identifiable: cafés and bars in brown varnished wood and lit with Edison bulbs; organic, free range produce prepared with artisanal flair; luxuriant hipster beards and the accompanying ecosystem of expensive men’s barbers; raincoats constructed to look relevantly like military parkas from the mid-twentieth century. Although not present at all levels of consumption, at certain social and economic strata the aesthetic is unavoidable, irrespective of location. We can observe this harmonisation of taste from Milan to Maputo. Of course, the tragic part of this shift in consumer trends is that while these objects bear the superficial marks of authenticity, they do exactly nothing to facilitate experiences of focality, because they disclose nothing of the world. These goods are not merely non-focal, like electrical power grids or sewer systems. Instead, they are pseudo-focal: we perceive them as actively *inauthentic*, because they aspire to focality but fail to achieve it, in much the same way that objects that aspire to beauty but fail can collapse into ugliness or camp. In failing, these failures of design only exacerbate the aforementioned crisis of authenticity.

Given the vast concatenation of both non-focal systems and pseudo-focal goods in urban spaces, all cities—smart or dumb—struggle to address the anomie inculcated by Borgmann’s device paradigm specifically, and by the insipid commercialism of late capitalism more generally. Indeed, under a certain reading, the entire history of twentieth and twenty-first century urban design is a series of attempts (of varying success) to address this anomie: the garden city, Le Corbusier’s modernist

nightmares, Speer's *Welthauptstadt Germania*, suburban sprawl, Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New Urbanism, and/or sustainable development. While the methods differ wildly—the atomising effect of Frank Lloyd Wright's commuter cities and the integrated walkability of the *Charter of New Urbanism* could not be less similar—all of these movements are, in one way or another, engaged with the question of how to make post-industrial life more existentially satisfying. However, not all of these attempts were equally successful. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the movements that best address this anomie are those producing spaces that facilitate phenomenologically rich, communal activity, by introducing public squares, mixed-use transport systems, and shared green spaces (Montgomery, 2013). In so doing, the city appears opened up, authenticated, *disclosed* to its residents.⁷ Echoing Henri Lefebvre, the residents' 'right to the city' is constantly and implicitly reaffirmed: hermeneutic relations made manifest in urban design:

Here and elsewhere we assert that there is no urban reality without a center, without a gathering together of all that can be born in space and can be produced in it, without an encounter, actual or possible, of all 'objects' and 'subjects' (Lefebvre, 1996).

All of this brings us back to the smart city. If cities already struggle to deal adequately with urban anomie due to the concatenation of non-focal systems and pseudo-focal design failures, then 'smart' systems do nothing to ameliorate these issues. If anything, and if Borgmann's intuitions are correct, they are liable to make these concerns *worse*. Nonetheless, attempts have been made to reconcile Borgmann's scholarship with the smart city. In Muki Haklay's essay, "Beyond Quantification", he proposes a program of smart urban renewal wherein citizens are directly responsible for data creation and gathering: what he calls 'participatory mapping'. Drawing inspiration from the work of citizen scientists, he imagines urban spaces wherein people adopt a custodial attitude to their own small corner of the world, using smart technologies to record, log, and improve their environs. He writes: "[the city is] a place for collective action and communal activities with good potential for developing new focal practices around data collection, processing and use. The degree to which users of existing technology are allowed to change the meaning of how it is used, or to apply it toward other unintended uses, is central to its potential to serve as a 'thing' and not only as a 'device'" (2018, p. 219).

However, I confess a degree of trepidation. While I certainly agree that smart cities could potentially provide new means of social and civic engagement for residents, I am entirely unconvinced that the means of engagement that he proposes qualify as sufficiently focal. Focal practices, after all, are oriented around the right kinds of hermeneutic relations: relations with artefacts that are (or seem to be) some combination of difficult, slow, unsafe, local, and intuitable. Focal goods need to be objects with which users can interface fulsomely and richly, engaging with a broad

⁷The implication here—that authenticity is not only desirable because we like it, but because it serves a public good in the sense of better facilitating citizen participation—is an idea that requires further unpacking. Unfortunately, I cannot do justice to in this chapter. However, I am very aware of this lacuna, and I intend to deal with it more substantively in a forthcoming paper.

phenomenological plenary in order to bring about a sense of *aletheia*. While participatory mapping offers urban residents a taste of agency, the ICT mechanisms by which this mapping is offered is still riddled with non-focal goods. Indeed, in order for the smart city to *be smart*, it must rely upon processes and mechanisms that are opaque, intensely complicated black boxes: processes and mechanisms categorically unavailable to both experience and intuition.

Nonetheless, while Haklay's proposal is necessarily constrained by taking Borgmann's ontological picture seriously, it carries the kernel of a solution. Given that urban residents already struggle to engage authentically with dumb cities thanks to the infrastructure and systems they have inherited, Haklay's proposal for smart cities looks like a means by which urban spaces can be returned to their residents. However, designers and planners in this space need to consider the actual *means* of engagement with respect to Borgmann's intuitions but without respect to his ontology: the points of interface wherein residents of the smart city can interact with, influence, and feed back into municipal systems. This means that not only must residents be able to feel the effects of their participatory mapping in a relatively immediate and non-attenuated way, but also that the process by which the mapping occurs is itself sufficiently focal: phenomenologically rich, communal, and seemingly intuitable.

This will also help preserve the *desirable* features of urban devices, while still rendering them more transparent to the body politic. It is obviously true that not all designed objects should be capable of hosting authentic experience. Indeed, in the case of large urban systems like plumbing or electricity this is almost certainly undesirable: while it might be *authentic* to contest with a wet rag and a pit toilet, the safety and ease of use offered by sewerage infrastructure seems clearly worth the odd touch of anomie. Indeed, this sort of non-focal but convenient infrastructure is among the features that make cities attractive places to live. However, I do think it might be desirable to *open up* device systems—and particularly devices in smart cities—by providing focal points of interface with the public. The structural integrity of a given polity is premised, at least partially, in the collective faith that systems of governance are sufficiently robust. In prising open these non-focal systems for examination, analysis, and interaction, the robustness of those systems can be clearly and obviously demonstrated.

As a design problem, the difficulties cannot be overstated: making an immensely complex, hidden system appear agreeable and open is hard enough without also having to guarantee that residents be able to interface robustly and hermeneutically with that immensely complex, hidden system. Nonetheless, in order for the smart city to succeed it *requires* these focal points of interface; it is an aesthetic imperative to facilitate world-disclosure. Anything less will only exacerbate the anomie that Borgmann articulates.

13.5 Concluding Remarks

While I do not and cannot endorse Borgmann's entire critical apparatus, I believe that the intuitions that he articulates are both real and powerful. Moreover, if the administrative promise of the smart city is to see fruition, we cannot afford to ignore these intuitions. Instead of adding yet more non-focal systems to our complex urban machinery, we must strive for means that make these systems more transparent, world-disclosing, and phenomenally enriching. These systems must permit urban spaces that facilitate the interaction of differences, with an eye to increasing both the democratic potential of urban spaces and the privileging of users over commercial activity. We have already mentioned Henri Lefebvre's 'right to the city': the radical proposal that is, in the words of David Harvey:

[...] far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights (2008, p. 23).

In light of these sentiments, it is my hope that designers of smart systems think seriously about the appropriate intersection between the smart city and the right to the city: in other words, what might be described as the 'right to the smart city'. For the utopian promise of the smart city to pay social dividends, automated systems must facilitate, even welcome, the plurality of both users and uses, whether serious, dull, administrative, libertine, or ludic. While we will not suffer ontological damage without the potential for robust, hermeneutic interaction, it is only in providing the possibility for focal interaction that the smart city can become aesthetically satisfying: from the smart city to the authentic city.

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Ryan Mitchell Wittingslow is an assistant professor of philosophy of art & culture at the University of Groningen, and received his PhD from the University of Sydney in 2014. Most of his research sits at the intersection of aesthetics, philosophy of technology, and philosophy of design. He also has devastating opinions about art.