



Panpsychism and the origins of the city

Description

Does a city think about its inhabitants? The question invites *panpsychism* into the urban discourse.

“The spaces around us are now being continually forged and reformed in informational and communicative processes. It is a world where we not only think of cities but cities think of us, where the environment reflexively monitors our behaviour” (789).

That’s a quote from urban geographers Mike Crang and Stephen Graham in their article “Sentient Cities.” They don’t mention the technical term *panpsychism*.

We are all panpsychists

Panpsychism asserts the all pervasive presence of mind or consciousness in animal, organic and inorganic matter. In his book *Panpsychism in the West*, David Skrbina presents panpsychism as a default belief, one that informs much current philosophy about consciousness and underpins some ancient thinking about the world:

“animism, hylozoism, pansensism, panbiotism, vitalism, pantheism, panentheism and panexperientialism” (12).

Animism is evident wherever ancient writers would appeal to *anima* (“soul,” “psyche”), that “everything in the world has a soul or a spirit” (12). *Spirit, life, breath* and *mind (nous)* conflate in the ancient imagination, joined by *sentience, consciousness* and *agency* in more recent traditions.

Panpsychism was evident in the surviving fragments of the philosopher Thales (c. 626 -545 bce) writings about the ubiquity of water as a holder of life. It’s also there in the writings of Plato (c. 428 -347bce), who suggested that the *polis* possesses a soul. That brings panpsychism closer to the city. The *polis* was the idealised city state. Here I quote Skrbina quoting Plato in *Republic*.

The polis is shown to have a three-part structure, one that parallels the tripartition of the human soul. The structures are the same, and the moral virtues are the same in each. The polis is 'courageous' (429b), 'has good judgment and is really wise' (428d), is 'just' (435a); generally, 'everything else that has to do with virtue [is] the same in both' (441c). Indeed, the parts of the polis come from the people themselves; 'where else would they come from?' (435e) 'Similar structure and similar effects imply a similar embodiment of soul, in human and polis alike' (49).

Admittedly that particular passage identifies the 'people themselves' as possessors of soul and virtue rather than the materials of the city.

Skrbina doesn't address architecture explicitly in this book. Nor have I yet found a reference in the book to the Roman belief in the 'spirit of place,' *genius loci*, influential within architecture and landscape architecture.

But, panpsychism was promoted by the Stoic philosophers, who current scholars have demonstrated provided the dominant theoretical and cultural context in which Vitruvius (c. 80-15 bce) wrote his *Ten Books on Architecture*. From my reading so far, panpsychism is permissive enough to be found almost anywhere. So it is easy to read Vitruvius through a panpsychist lens: e.g. the personification of the sun, wind and water.

Panpsychism and theology

In so far as Christianity has exerted influence in Western architecture, it too is tainted with 'panpsychist thinking' (52). According to Skrbina, Stoicism exerted influence in the writing of the Old and New Testaments, particularly in relation to the difficult concept of the *Holy Spirit*.

'there appears to be good justification for claiming Stoic influence in the Bible, at least within the figure of the Holy Spirit, which has always had an odd and troubling status within a monotheistic system. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that this influence is widely ignored by Christian theologians' (70).

Orthodox theology subsumes spirit within monotheism.

'Christianity took spirit out of nature and placed it largely, and ambiguously, within the monotheistic figure of God' (68).

Pantheism, if not panpsychism, also leaks through in art, architecture and other cultural traditions, not least in concepts of the secular, profane, primitive, pagan and carnivalesque. See post: [Elect and clown; expect a circus](#) about the carnival.

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Note

- Featured image is the ceiling of the Pantheon, Rome, photographed 2012.

Category

1. Architecture

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