

Thinking With Fragments: The Allure of the Broken, Discarded, and Disjointed in Urban Space

EDITED BY: DR EMANUELE AMO
EMILY HOLMES
BEN WALKLING
JAMES WELDON

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Agoriad / Openings

HYWEL GRIFFITHS 

AGORIAD

Mae'n rhyfedd sut mae pethau'n cau amdanom
wrth inni ymbellhau,
pan rhwygir bylchau
ym mrethyn cymdeithas
mae'n haws ein mygu, rhywsut;

ac mae'r drws y dylem ei agor
wedi chwyddo yn ei ffrâm
a phapurach wedi stwffio
yn nhwll y clo.

Ond mae'r allwedd gennym,
a maes i ymarfer syniadau,
i arfer hyder y troi
cyn camu
trwy'r bylchau ym muriau
ein gorwelion

er mwyn gweld rhai newydd, pellach,
er mwyn ymestyn atynt,
er mwyn tynnu pethau
ynghyd
amdanom.

CONTRIBUTOR

Hywel is a Reader in Physical Geography through the
medium of Welsh at Aberystwyth University

Email: hmg@aber.ac.uk

OPENINGS

It's strange how things close in on us
even as we drift apart,
when rents are ripped
in communities' cloth
it's easier to smother us, somehow;

and the door that should be opened
has swollen in its frame,
its keyhole stuffed with papers.

But we have the key,
and space to exercise ideas,
to turn our practice confidently
before we step
through the gaps
in our horizon's walls

to see new skylines from afar,
to reach for them,
to pull things
together
around us.



Editorial Introduction: Working With Fragments

BEN WALKLING , EMANUELE AMO , EMILY HOLMES,  & JAMES WELDON 



CONTRIBUTORS

Ben Walkling recently submitted his PhD thesis in the Geography Department at Swansea University.

Address: Department of Geography, Swansea University, Wallace Building, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, UK.

Email: 826001@swansea.ac.uk

Emanuele Amo is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Human Geography at Aberystwyth University.

Address: Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, SY23 3DB, UK.

Email: ema21@aber.ac.uk

Emily Holmes is a PhD student in Human Geography at Swansea University.

Address: Department of Geography, Swansea University, Wallace Building, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, UK.

Email: 2255748@swansea.ac.uk

James Weldon is an ESRC-funded PhD researcher at the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University.

Address: School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK.

Email: weldonjr@cardiff.ac.uk

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It is a pleasure and an honour to welcome readers to the second issue of *Agoriad: A Journal of Spatial Theory*. Each issue of *Agoriad* develops in conjunction with the Gregynog Theory School, which is a two-day residential theory school held annually at Gregynog Hall, in Powys, Wales, exploring current theoretical debates in critical geography. In 2024, the theme of the Theory School was ‘thinking with fragments’, encouraging a conversation over ‘the allure of the broken, discarded and disjointed in urban space’. This way of thinking frees our attention by refusing to fix on any particular meaning, overarching narrative, or lost totality—presenting a compelling opening in increasingly polarised times. The Gregynog Theory School had the pleasure of welcoming Colin McFarlane as its keynote speaker, whose rich research brought the role of the fragment in urban spatial production to life. This issue of *Agoriad* features the keynote paper delivered by McFarlane, as well as an accompanying interview, and a subsequent Question & Answer session.

We, as the issue editors, also found fragments to be a draw that brought us together. Through our work to get this issue published, we have combined our diverse experiences and research practices to provide insights into some of the ways the fragmentary approach is taken within Human Geography. It became an opportunity to reach beyond the narrow focus of our own PhD and post-doctoral research to engage with early career academics working in a variety of contexts. In this sense the issue enabled a pulling together of the fragmented lives of postgraduate researchers, both within and outside Wales.

The editorial team decided to open the allure of the fragments further for this issue to include Geography in a broader sense by including contributions from non-urban contexts. We were delighted with the breadth of critical thought that we received and that many of the contributions came from PhD students and early career researchers. *Agoriad* journal is proud to be able to support these publications. The submissions take us from elm trees to disasters and back to abandoned gardens to name but a few. They serve as a remarkable response to the questions, ideas and tensions that emerged from our call for papers.

The name of this Journal, *Agoriad*, translates (from Welsh) into English as ‘Openings’. The power of fragments to draw us in and provide rich analytic approaches is demonstrated by the wide-reaching contexts within which the papers of this issue demonstrate, engage, and challenge us to think with their fragments. ‘Agoriad / Openings’ is also the title of Hywel Griffiths’ poem, commissioned for the inaugural issue of this journal. The final stanza contains a perfect image for the allure of the discarded as it closes with ‘to see new skylines from afar, / to reach for them, / to pull things / together / around us’ [er mwyn gweld rhai newydd, pellach, / er mwyn ymestyn atynt, / er mwyn tynnu pethau / ynghyd / amdanom] (Griffiths 2024). This image brings together the collection of disparate and similar fragments explored within this issue and the way that you as a reader pull them together yet cannot fully make them whole as you read: the opening up of contexts and understandings through the broken fragments.

McFarlane’s paper explores the potential for writing in fragments, taking the reader through his use of fragments in the book *Fragments of the City: Making and Remaking Urban Worlds* (McFarlane 2021) and addressing some of the wider potentialities and pitfalls for fragmentary thinking. In his keynote paper, McFarlane outlines his reasons for writing in and about fragments in the urban sphere. In particular, he traces a loose genealogy of others who have experimented with textual fragmentation—work that serves as

inspiration for his own writing. He takes the reader through a variety of other work that has been written in fragments, from Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1999) to Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait With Keys: Joburg and What-What* (2006): a collection of works that highlight the variety of possible ways of working in fragments, and not always limited to the written word. It is through these authors that McFarlane became drawn to the idea of the form of his writing reflecting and reinforcing its content. The paper finishes with a lesson learned from his exploration of fragmentary writing: 'to resist forever relying on the tried and tested' (McFarlane 2025: 10), thereby opening up new ways of seeing the world.

McFarlane's work receives further close attention in both Emanuele Amo and Fabiana D'Ascenzo's (2025) contribution and Dongyang Mi, Xinyue Dong and Xiaowen Zhan's (2025) contribution to this issue. The former, a transcript of an interview carried out with McFarlane at the Gregynog Theory School in 2024, focuses on McFarlane's fieldwork encounters and how they came to shape his view of fragments and the unequal power relations embedded in these encounters. Notably, this interview also considers fragmentation outside of urban space and how many of the processes he addresses in his work also occur in rural areas. McFarlane explains that the key distinction between the urban and the rural in this case is the greater degree of intensity and density of fragmentation and breakdown in urban spaces. The latter contribution, a synthesis of an urban theory workshop delivered by McFarlane at the University of Manchester in June 2025, contains a far-ranging discussion with a particular focus on the relationship between the universal and the particular. The Question and Answer session with students contained in this contribution provides an interesting application of McFarlane's thinking to students' research in a variety of contexts. McFarlane's thinking on fragments, as featured in these three articles, extends throughout this issue, forming the basis of many of the articles within it.

Tatiana Bodnar's (2025) paper presents an embodied, auto-ethnographic reflection on a guerrilla garden cultivated over six months using waste and fly-tipped materials. Bodnar considers the garden's discarded fragments as both the residue and the raw material of regeneration, asking how acts of reclamation can seed new imaginaries of hope. Using the *Diwedd* (meaning 'End' in Welsh) Garden as a fragmented entry point, this creative intervention explores how geographers might adopt 'broken world thinking' (Jackson 2014: 221) to engage creatively and critically with the production of urban space. Bodnar's innovative engagement with the *Diwedd* Garden engages the reader with more-than-human dramas, Scandinavian *Skrammellegepladser* (junk playgrounds), and a 17th-century radical gardening movement. Through the process of gathering, repurposing and composting discarded urban fragments, Bodnar illustrates how creative, material engagement offers alternative, embodied and hopeful ways of knowing and relating within spatial theory.

Doris Duhennois' (2025) paper takes us to Martinique and Saint Lucia where they encourage us to examine the affective landscapes within which colonial monuments are embedded. It employs 'care' as a principle that can bring together diverse perspectives. The paper utilises creative methodologies as it discusses such practice as the use of a *ti banc la* (a small bench in Creole) as an object placed in front of the colonial Inniskilling Monument as a means of engaging with participants. Alongside this, Duhennois provides an 3D image of an alternative monument that includes the freedom fighters within it. Duhennois argues that 'these experiments, in

particular, highlighted that the meaning of monuments is shaped not only by the harmful stories they celebrate and the institutional and grassroots attempts at transforming these stories, but also by the personal, individual, and intimate relations of people who experience these sites on a daily basis' (Duhennois 2025: 17). The care and personal reflections by Duhennois provide a thoughtful example of creative approaches to the decolonisation of monuments and the role memory can play in this.

Following McFarlane's relational theory, Weronika Kozak's (2025) article suggests considering urban remains not as lifeless products of decay and abandonment, but as entities endowed with real potential, both in what they are and in how they connect to other objects and spaces. To understand, work with, and preserve these remains, the author proposes a new approach: a counter-archiving project that highlights their potential and diversity. The counter-archive is a way to record urban leftovers without attempting to provide a complete or orderly picture. Instead, it uses fragments such as prints, drawings, collages and photos to highlight both their ambiguity and hidden details. By blending research with playful and fictional elements, the artifacts stimulate curiosity, speculation and multiple interpretations. In this way, the counter-archive maintains the mystery of urban leftovers while simultaneously showcasing their richness and potential. Kozak thus presents us with a fresh and imaginative study of spaces and discarded remnants.

Harry Smith's (2025) paper builds on contemporary assemblage theory and disaster-risk management to analyse Storm Daniel (2023) and the 2023 Eastern Libyan Floods. It presents a conceptual and methodological contribution to both disaster studies and cultural geographical approaches by synthesising McFarlane's (2021) notion of fragments with Donovan's (2017) Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Assemblage framework to explore the lived experiences of disaster. Smith draws his analysis from three fragments of disaster: Mustafa al Trabelsi's poem *The Rain* (Wintour 2023); a political narrative from Eastern Libyan authorities; and humanitarian fieldwork. These fragments offer a lens onto the contested politics of disaster causation and justice, exposing the resistances and power struggles shaping disaster response and recovery in Eastern Libya.

Mengyuan Wang's (2025) paper addresses fragmentation in the context of urban villages in the Chinese city of Xi'an. These urban villages are persistent remnants of rural settlements that have been incorporated into the expanding urban sphere, and that can sit in conflict with the state's desired approach to urban development. This article traces the uneven production of public space through time, viewing this process through the experience of street vendors and other village inhabitants. To illuminate these experiences Wang draws on Benjamin's (1999) notion of fragments and Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space to reveal the tension at the core of this fragmentation: between formal state-driven approaches to urban planning and grassroots adaptations. In so doing, Wang extends the relevance of these theorists beyond Western capitalist contexts and asks two crucial questions: Who has the power to determine the production of these fragmented urban spaces?; and who benefits or is negatively impacted by this fragmentation?

While Wang's Xi'an case study is in a decidedly urban context, these villages operate as a fragment of rural life in a way that disrupts a linear process of development from a fragmented state to a cohesive whole. Wang describes the public space within Ganjia village as 'fragments within fragments', arguing that 'fragmentation is not simply a stage in urban transition but an

enduring and adaptive condition’ (2025: 20). This article further shows that fragments and fragmentation cannot be ignored; they are a persistent and notable presence in urban space. Given this persistent nature, Wang calls for urban planning practices to refrain from trying to eliminate fragmentation and instead embrace flexibility and informality.

James Weldon’s paper argues for a reconceptualisation of plant life that persists beyond fragmentation, challenging the assumption that vitality is confined to whole organisms. Drawing on the case of Brighton’s elm trees, the study examines how fragments of elm, lost to Dutch Elm Disease through the interaction of elm bark beetles (*Scolytus spp.*) and the fungus *Ophiostoma novo-ulmi*, continue to circulate in urban space. These fragments, including logs and regenerating suckers, both aid the spread of disease and necessitate ongoing protection of the city’s remaining mature elms. Following McFarlane’s (2021) attention to overlooked fragments, the paper demonstrates that these remnants are variously valued, ignored, salvaged and attended to, highlighting their active role in shaping urban environments. By foregrounding fragments alongside wholes, the study disrupts binary distinctions between life and death, part and whole, and reveals the radical agency of plant bodies in urban ecologies. It contributes to scholarship on plant–human interactions by showing that plant life persists and exerts influence even after the death of the whole.

The two book reviews within this issue highlight key texts that are useful when exploring the idea of the fragment. Firstly, Angharad Closs Stephens’ review of Ash Amin’s (2023) *After Nativism: Belonging in an Age of Intolerance* discusses the timeliness of Amin’s book, demonstrating how it can act as a ‘a guidebook to a myriad of ways of imagining community in shared futures beyond the insularity, violence and racism of populist nationalism’ (Closs Stephens 2025: 2). Secondly, D’Ascenzo’s book review of McFarlane’s (2021) *Fragments of the City: Making and Remaking Urban Worlds* provides useful insights into one of the key pieces of literature in this issue’s guided readings, highlighting once again the analytic power of the fragment as we examine the urban context.

Alongside the set of papers discussed above, this issue of *Agoriad* includes a collection of guided readings that were engaged with and discussed at length at the Gregynog Theory School in 2024. These readings draw heavily on the idea of urban fragments from McFarlane’s extensive work and the fragmentary work of Benjamin in his ‘Theses on the philosophy of history’ (1968) and *The Arcades Project* (1999), which are picked up in several of the papers in this issue. These readings can provide an entry point into the vast literature of fragments in geography.

This issue of *Agoriad* brings forth many research projects on fragments together in a constellation and in conversation with each other. Within this issue the fragments of disasters, of colonial monuments, and of Chinese villages are held collectively. We hope this collection of fragments held together by a common theme inspires further researchers to consider, deliberate, enquire, read, and examine the allure of the broken and the fragment, especially at a time when ever more seems to be breaking.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed to the drafting and conceptualising of this editorial.

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AGO riAD

A Journal of Spatial Theory

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Agoriad (meaning *Openings* in Welsh) is a diamond open access journal exploring theoretical and philosophical ideas in Human Geography and associated fields, published annually. Each volume explores a key theme, linked to the annual Gregynog Theory School which is hosted by the Welsh Graduate School of Social Sciences.

Agoriad is edited by postgraduate and early career researchers with oversight and support from a managing editorial team. Its aim is to publish high-quality research on key theoretical debates, as well as to provide a supportive publishing process for researchers at all levels.

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