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Reconnecting *Civitas* and *Urbs*: making tourists and remote workers as temporary urban citizens

Daniele Belleri[a], Michael Baick[b], Carlo Ratti[c]

[a]*Carlo Ratti Associati*
[b]*Editor/writer*
[c]*MIT Professional Educational - Cambridge (MA)*

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Abstract

Ancient Romans posited a strict correspondence between the city as a physical concept - what they called urbs - and the society that inhabited it - the civitas. This conceptualization rested on an assumption that went largely unchallenged for centuries: most people live where they belong. What happens, then, when the social and technological conditions of the contemporary world severs these ties? Tourists criss-cross the planet seeking leisure, high-powered workers extend their careers across continents, and migrants flee their homes in search of new opportunities. To rebuild a coherent notion of urban citizenship, one that allows communities to flourish, this perspective article sketches a model of "variable citizenship," that could account for different categories of people who have been cut off from conventional modes of belonging. With this new, flexible model of citizenship, supported both by digital tools and design projects that reclaim the importance of physical, shared public spaces, we can reconnect the urbs to the fast-moving civitas of our time.

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For centuries, most Western societies rested on a couple of assumptions that can no longer be counted on. First: most people live where they belong. Second: the sense of belonging is inextricably tied to one's birthplace. With individuals staying in the same places for years or generations, community and civic participation were easier to foster. In other words, there was a relatively straightforward correspondence between one's physical location – what the ancient Romans called the *urbs:* the built-up component of a city – and the people who rightly inhabit it – the *civitas* (Romano, 1993).

In the last few decades, an increasing number of people, in different life circumstances, have experienced a severance of the civitas-urbs correspondence. Multiple social, economic and technological factors have created this situation. International business interests, more affordable air travel, and digitization, coupled with generally less rigid regional and national borders, have facilitated new connections between distant places, prompting more and more people to look beyond their immediate surroundings – be it for leisure or for work, to satisfy personal ambitions, or to flee from undesirable political or environmental conditions. Under the pressure of millions of individuals' uncoordinated decisions, the ultimate outcome is that so many of the *civitates* of our world have been pried apart from their *urbs*.

Nowhere is this happening as dramatically as in big cities, the pivotal nodes of the globalized economy (Sassen, 2001). Our metropolitan centers are filling with tourists, globe-trotting commuters, remote workers, and ever-growing numbers of migrants. These groups travel across the planet under extremely different circumstances, but they share the common experience of not fitting into the communities where they arrive. Their physical presence, multiplied by the thousands, challenges the correspondence between *urbs* and *civitas* - being in a certain place does not automatically imply being part of its civic society.

The possibility of millions of human beings coming from faraway places to live together might sound to some like the realization of a cosmopolitan utopia. Undoubtedly, the possibility to decouple one's place of birth from one's destiny has been liberating for multitudes of individuals. However, when looking at this issue on a collective scale, the mismatch between *urbs* and *civitas* generates a series of fundamental social issues and provokes profound social tensions. In different contexts, it can fuel phenomena as diverse as political polarization and social resentment, urban fragmentation and segregation, or distrust in civic institutions. Populist politicians have been the first to skillfully and selfishly exploit the layperson's sense of unease and fear vis-à-vis this changing reality; how can this vulnerability be repaired?

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When we consider the history of cities, we find that the underlying principles are simple. Cities emerged 10,000 years ago, and they succeeded because they brought together a large population with a shared, vested interest in a common space. In these ancient urban centers, we can see the rudimentary basis of citizenship as a simple exchange: civic contributions for civic freedom. Those with the formal or informal status of "citizen" are afforded certain rights and advantages, from access to markets to the power of the ballot. As a medieval German adage went: "the air of the cities makes you free," and no wonder. Cities would offer far broader horizons than the countryside where peasants struggled to make a living. However, becoming a citizen was not just a question of breathing: that privilege was earned by following certain rules and making critical contributions, from taxes and economic participation to membership in community institutions. It is easy to make these contributions when one lives in a place long-term; a job becomes available, a church surrounds you with holy community, the tax collector knows where to find your door. However, cities have always been less well-equipped to handle new and short-term residents — neither the visitor nor the city she visits is agile enough to collect civic dues and dole out civic privileges. The *civitas* and *urbs* fail to click together, and the newtimers are legally and socially excluded from the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. This failure of connection comes in political, economic, and cultural terms.

How can we restore the staying power of citizenship in a world where the experience of rootlessness has become so widespread? Some might dream of a return to the past, when everyone stays in the place where they were born for their entire life. But that is simply not possible: the globe has become deeply bound together, and no realistic return is in sight. Accepting that present trends are likely to continue, a possible solution might lie in rethinking our understanding of the very idea of urban citizenship, with the objective of mending the recently-formed rift between *urbs* and *civitas*.

In this text, we sketch a form of "variable" urban citizenship: legal and cultural paradigms which acknowledge the reality of a highly mobile global population and bring these transient *civitates* back into the embrace of the *urbs*. To do so, we must think nimbly about the kinds of ways that people can be incorporated into their communities, even if they are new or temporary residents**.** To flesh out this idea, we will apply it to two groups of people for whom a form of variable citizenship could apply: tourists and remote workers. We imagine policies at the level of the city, focusing on the idea that citizenship is first and foremost lived at the level of one's physically proximate community. While our speculative model touches upon issues studies by multiple disciplines, our first focus is a possible role of designers in reconnecting the *urbs* and the *civitas* through their action on physical space.

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First, let us consider the tourist, an individual whom is often imagined as the exact opposite of a citizen. Tourism is a lucrative business, and it has boomed in the era of cheap air travel. The birth of the post-war world is very much the birth of a world of tourists. Global travel has skyrocketed: from 25 million tourists in 1950 to 1.4 billion in 2019 (Roser, 2022). The fragile, local balance between *urbs* and *civitas* can be tragically disrupted by this colossal human flow.

Tourists certainly bring in money but rarely have attachment or commitment to the long-term well-being of the places they visit. "To be a tourist is to escape accountability," American novelist Don DeLillo famously wrote:

> *"Errors and failings don't cling to you the way they do back home. You're able to drift across continents and languages, suspending the operation of sound thought. […] You don't know how to talk to people, how to get anywhere, what the money means, what time it is, what to eat or how to eat it" (DeLillo, 1989).*

DeLillo observes that tourists are granted "immunities and broad freedoms" in exchange for their cash; this empty transaction is a perversion of the mutually beneficial exchange that defines citizenship. At their worst, hit-and-run tourists disrupt local public life, disrespect local customs, warp local economies, and price long-term residents out of their homes.

Resentment against tourists is boiling over. In the years immediately before the first outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, young Catalan activists famously vandalized a tour bus in Barcelona, slashing its tires and spray-painting "tourism is killing neighborhoods" on the windshield. The conflict is especially nasty in cities where tourists outnumber long-term residents. In some cities – especially the ones that are losing population – tourists outnumber residents by a significant ratio. Calculations of the flows of urban visitors can get quite fuzzy, due to the difficulty of accounting not just for those who check-in at a hotel or Airbnb, but also for day-trippers. Some estimates have put the figure for pre-pandemic Venice at a staggering 20 million people per year, that is, roughly 350 tourists per resident of the historic city (Momigliano, 2020) – that number is around 20 in Barcelona (Abend, 2018) and 8.5 in Paris (Guillou, 2022).

How can cities control the torrent of tourists? The municipality of Venice decided to protect its citizens by charging a "tourist tax" (€3, which would eventually rise to €10) for day-trippers entering the city's historic center (Giuffrida, 2022). If tourists do not contribute to the city's life through community membership, Venice could at least extract more monetary value to undo the damage they cause. The funds raised by the tax would, according to the city's mayor, go to cleaning and maintaining security, expenses that are currently upheld by Venetians alone. However, before the tax could be implemented anywhere, COVID-19 struck, bringing international travel to a halt. The planned tax in Venice has been repeatedly delayed, and is now scheduled to be implemented in 2023 (Buckley, 2022).

The tourist tax contains the rudiments of a citizen-like relationship – paying an extra tax to access the privileges of boating in the canals or strolling through the Piazza San Marco – but the attempt is a narrow one, relying entirely on money as the unit of account for civic goods that cannot be so easily commodified. Squeezing more money out of tourists could raise revenues in the short term, but it cannot address the structural issues that tourists create. Indeed, a more extreme version of the Venetian tax, a relatively small amount of money, might worsen the problems of gentrification by selecting only the wealthiest tourists. If Venice is trying to avoid being Disneyland, raising entrance fees might just turn it into Mar-a-Lago. The flimsiness of a purely transactional relationship was proven during COVID-19 – no tourist felt any roots that would have motivated them to stay in the city that depended on them.

One alternative to address the problems of tourism without the blunt instruments of commodification would be incentivizing tourists to settle in cities for longer periods. Almost inherently, a tourist who stays for a few weeks or months rather than a few days becomes more accountable, more like a citizen. Instead of visiting a restaurant once, a longer-term tourist might become a repeat customer who leaves kind tips and makes good conversation with wait staff. She might learn to speak at a proper volume, and support a broader range of commercial activities than hotels, gift shops, and tour buses. This would not only be good for the city, it would enhance the experience of travel itself. Rather than moving towards the pessimistic vision of French philosopher Paul Ricouer, who decried how, in the modern world, everywhere "one finds the same bad movies, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminum atrocities" (Ricoeur, 1955) visitors might actually enjoy spending longer periods of time in different cities. We call this model "pace tourism," and we believe it could help reconnecting *urbs* and *civitas* in tourist destinations around the world.

The potential of pace tourism is already visible in extant programs that encourage long stays. Consider another case in Italy, the southern city of Matera, named European Capital of Culture in 2019, which decided to rebrand its tourists as "temporary citizens" (Melucci, 2019) and invite them to help contribute something to the town. As a result, tourism boomed – without some of the seemingly inevitable tradeoffs. One could also consider study abroad programs and traveling fellowships employed by university students across the world. Anchored by host families and other schools, these semester or year-long stays are transformative without being transactional.

As these examples show, other contributions, beyond the financial, can qualify someone for a form of citizenship without requiring long-term residence. Instead of a monetary tourist tax, what about a civic contribution tax that could come in many other forms? For example, one could become a temporary citizen of Venice for one year in exchange for help with maintenance on its palazzos and stuccos. Young graduates could share digital skills to assist startups; retired members of Ingénieurs sans frontières could work to restore the canals. Temporary citizens can become one with the *urbs* with projects that focus on the space itself, giving them the chance to inscribe their lives into the stones themselves – joining with Venetians who have done so for centuries. Moreover, they would learn local customs: their language skills would grow beyond an introductory manual, and they might graduate from visiting restaurants to learning how to cook local cuisine for themselves.

Municipal governments could take action in bringing pace travel to their cities, leveraging the power of online platforms. They could create roles for

volunteering and temporary employment, and they could incentivize companies like AirBnB, or smaller operators, to offer discounts for longer stays. Apps, now ubiquitously embedded with location-based services, can also be programmed to provide incentives based on length of stay and degree of local engagement. These digital tools could be paired with lower-tech strategies, like adding a minimum stay stipulation to certain tourist visas. The ultimate objective would be to transform tourists from lucrative annoyances to honored, valued guests.

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Another key group to consider is international commuters and remote workers. This demographic travels the world not just to spend money, but first and foremost to earn it.

Fifty years ago, urban theorist Melvin Webber predicted that "for the first time in history, it might be possible to locate on a mountain top and to maintain intimate, real-time, and realistic contact" (Webber, 1968). In 2020, his prophecy came true. Since the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis, many white-collar workers have discovered that they can do their jobs from anywhere. Connecting digitally with their colleagues, billions of people climbed up the steep, steep sides of the mountaintop.

Once again, this new arrangement puts into question the correspondence between *urbs* and *civitas*. Linking technological progress to social changes, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (1989) famously wrote about the emergence of an unprecedented "Space of Flows." According to Castells, information technology and early digitization has created a society where wealth, and power increasingly bypass physical space. This logic challenges the traditional logic of the "Space of Places" where localities hold a central position in societal organization.

When Castells elaborated his theory, many experts shared the opinion that the positive effects of the "Space of Flows" would outrun any possible negative outcome. In contrast to that, a less optimistic scholar was American historian Christopher Lasch. *In The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (Lasch, 1995), a collection of essays published shortly after Lasch's death, the author decried how a threat to American democracy came from its elites, which "have removed themselves from the common life". While the reasons for these phenomena were manifold, among them was the fact that executives and other high-powered professionals were now operating in a global information market, which allowed them to embrace a regime of international mobility. As a result, these individuals were not tied to any specific location anymore, founding themselves detached from any obligations to the local community. Lasch predicted that in the long run, this dynamic would increase political polarization and provoke a detriment of democratic processes and civic trust.

When the book was published, Lasch estimated that the "elites" made up roughly a fifth of the population of the United States. Since then, and especially with the unexpected acceleration in remote working adoption ushered in by the pandemic, the number of people who had the possibility to leave the physical workspaces and retreat in isolation increased. This group disproportionately comes from the sector of knowledge workers, and while they still may not amount to a majority of residents, as tourists sometimes do, it has reached a size that was unimaginable until a few years ago.

Despite some of the hypothesis mentioned, it was not entirely clear that remote work could necessarily rip apart our civic fabric – that is, until the COVID-19 pandemic gave us the data to confirm the danger. As this massive, unprecedented shift occurred, we gained a once-in-a-lifetime chance to study exactly what effects remote work would have on the individual and societal level.

First, let us characterize social networks using terms developed by the sociologist Mark Granovetter. He divides relationships into two types, the "strong ties" we maintain with friends and family and the "weak ties" we form with casual acquaintances (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties yield dense, overlapping networks; your close friends are often close friends with each other. But our weak ties are in many situations even more important, because they connect us to a far broader range of people and completely separate social circles (or "bubbles", to say it in more Internet-friendly terms). Those individuals are more likely to introduce you to new ideas, challenge your preconceptions, and make you aware of the world outside your strong ties. They help us find job opportunities and adapt to new innovations. To put it simply, weak ties are the glue that hold us together as a broader community. Granovetter posited that weak ties are indispensable to a healthy civic life. They are key agents for maintaining trust, enthusiasm, and mutual understanding among people of different beliefs. Without them, a society begins to decohere.

From the outset of the pandemic, our Senseable City Lab at MIT began to study how remote work affects the formation of weak ties. Using anonymous data from the Institute's email servers, we found that students, professors, and administrators began to exchange more messages with a smaller group of contacts. In other words, strong ties were becoming stronger and weak ties were falling away (Mazzarello & Ratti, 2020). This finding fits the anecdotal experiences of many people who were locked down: we dedicated more time to our families at home and to our close friends online. In that same period, our acquaintances slipped through the cracks.

Why does the Internet sever weak ties in a way that physical space does not? The key factor to consider is the inevitability and serendipity of the physical world that is impossible to recreate online. The Internet allows us to cherry-pick what to see and whom to talk to, a habit only fueled by the digital algorithms that reinforce our connections with those who most agree with us. Needless to say, in shared offices, buses, or sidewalks, we can't screen out weak ties with one click. Indeed, we run into people and ideas we'd never expect. For these key interactions to take place, we need the common ground of an *urbs* to create the weak ties that bind a *civitas* together.

Yet remote work is clearly here to stay. Short of a Luddite temper tantrum that forces employees to stay in the office and ignore new technology entirely, how can we re-incorporate remotely working employees into physical communities? We will need to devise a host of arrangements that coax them back into the social vitality of physical space. The key will lie in adjustments to urban infrastructure, and places to work in particular. The physical office retains its crucial importance in favoring the formation of weak ties, as other shared urban spaces do.

Lasch attributed a part of the *Betrayal of Democracy* to the loss of "third places" – a term coined by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg in the 1980s (Oldenburg, 2005) to indicate those spaces beyond the home and workplace that foster spontaneous conversation among citizens of different social classes. This, in turn, echoes the definition of "social infrastructure" provided by Eric Klinenberg (2018) in "Palaces for the People". In his words:

> *"'Infrastructure' is not a term conventionally used to describe the underpinnings of social life. But this is a consequential over-sight, because the built environment – and not just cultural preferences or the existence of voluntary organizations – influences the breadth and depth of our associations. [...] What counts as social infrastructure? I define it capaciously. Public institutions, such as libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, athletic fields, and swimming pools, are vital parts of the social infrastructure. So too are sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, and other green spaces that invite people into the public realm. Community organizations, including churches and civic associations, act as social infrastructures when they have an established physical space where people can assemble, as do regularly scheduled markets for food, furniture, clothing, art, and other consumer goods. Commercial establishments can also be important parts of the social infrastructure, particularly when they operate as what the sociologist Ray Oldenburg called 'third spaces,' places (like cafés, diners, barbershops, and bookstores) where people are welcome to congregate and linger regardless of what they've purchased. Entrepreneurs typically start these kinds of businesses because they want to generate income. But in the process, as close observers of the city such as Jane Jacobs and the Yale ethnographer Elijah Anderson have discovered, they help produce the material foundations for social life" (Klinenberg, 2018).*

Although many remote workers come from the private sector, municipal governments cannot leave the effort of creating physical spaces for them to inhabit to the discretion of private co-working firms or spacious cafes with high-speed internet connections. Services and establishments such as WeWork and Starbucks cafes are not necessarily spaces that will create the diversity of encounters and weak ties that are fundamental to the *urbs-civitas* balance.

What forms of public social infrastructure can help to enfold remote workers back into the *urbs* around them? Based on the concept of a *civitas* and *urbs* requiring physical proximity, we should focus on engendering citizenship in whatever place a remote worker spends the most time. The nightmare scenario we wish to avoid is a desolate "Zoomtown," where everyone spends their days on a computer, participating only in the life of some other place.

How can we imagine a civic space for remote workers? From a designer's perspective, a starting point could be the template of the public library, an institution which developed in the late 19th and early 20th century with aspirations to help all citizens educate themselves. It would be a mistake to think that the digitalization of many archives and books has rendered libraries obsolete. In fact, as time has worn on, they became places where people around the world already gather for much more than reading. WiFi, public access, and other amenities make these attractive, democratic alternatives to private co-working spaces. Now, with the goal of citizenship in mind, architects and planners should strive to imagine further ways to make libraries even more relevant.

From a functional point of view, amenities like conference rooms, fab labs or spaces for training, and office supply stores have already been incorporated into large-scale libraries around the world, such as the Oodi National Library of Finland, which opened near Helsinki's Central Station in late 2018 to celebrate the country's centenary of independence (Angelopoulou, 2018). Similarly, the extension of the Taiwan National Library, designed by CRA-Carlo Ratti Associati and Bio-Architecture Formosana (BAF), investigated the future role of the library in a digitized society. It centered on the concept of "Library as a Town". The new infrastructure would accommodate a variety of

functions, including a book museum and a joint archives center (Morgan, 2018).

Other changes would be programmatic, and should aim to bridge the needs of the local communities with those of the traveling citizens of the digital era. Libraries could offer services to workers on the move like language courses, tax advice, social events, and opportunities to enroll in volunteer work. Indeed, they could eventually aspire to become like embassies or community centers for the liminal lives of "variable citizens," helping them to become more closely tied to the local community and one another. Moreover, so long as libraries also maintain their vital, present functions, they could become a space of social intercourse for permanent and transient populations.

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Variable citizenship is much easier to imagine than to implement. While we can fantasize about working around the rigid systems of nation-states, embracing the prospect of "mayors ruling the world" (Barber, 2014), it will be difficult to tackle issues of taxation, suffrage, government benefits, and more. Moreover, the merits of these proposals do not generate political will to be achieved. Green cards, visas, and even passports might attract political firestorms. For all of these reasons, any creation of a variable citizenship scheme should be implemented gradually.

In fact, the practical advantages of developing variable citizenship to establish new correspondences between *urbs* and *civitas* might extend beyond the categories of tourists and remote workers. There is a third population that dwarfs the two mentioned here: migrants.

Earlier on, we argued that migrants and tourists, while moving for obviously very different reasons, face similar criticisms about a failure to engage with the local cultures. Here, a robust model of variable citizenship, perhaps developed against lower-stakes populations such as tourists, could help teach an *urbs* to integrate them. While this essay will not engage in the complex task of sketching an extra declension of the variable citizenship scheme that could apply to migrants, this would definitely be worth further exploration, especially as international human flows are poised to increase, further exacerbated by climate crisis-induced conflicts and displacements.

The increasing number of people on the move in our digitized, highly-connected world – from tourists to remote-working professionals – is posing fundamental challenges to our cities' social cohesion. In general terms, this tension can be brought back to the severance of the historic correspondence between *urbs* and *civitas*. The speculative proposal of a "variable citizenship" approach, outlined in this essay, aims to restore this balance, albeit in more flexible ways. Under the constant weight of shifting crises, technological changes, and human movements, we must redesign the tools of urban citizenship, while also designing physical spaces that favor social encounters and encourage fruitful exchanges between the more stable populations and the temporary residents. From shifting municipal policies to building next-generation community centers, we have means to enact a revolutionary, necessary change in how we imagine who belongs where. Ultimately, we may eventually shift the age-old assumption – that people should live in the city where they belong – into its inverse: people can always come to belong where they live.

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