

Poor pavements, nobody seems to be thinking of them. Unless they are broken, that is. This invisibility is telling.

For modernist urbanites, walking has become an act of material oblivion. Each step seems to distance us further from the pavement beneath, as if sidewalks were always supposed to vanish from our attention, their silent permanence a barely noticed support for public life.

Still, this contrasts sharply with their sweeping importance across the planet over the last century. Urban living has hinged on paved ground—compacted, standardised, sealed. Pavements lie at the core of our modern infrastructure.

In fact, a defining thread of most urban arenas – and that perhaps accounts for nearly all contemporary human habitats, thought infrastructurally – is that they are paved through and through.

In *A thousand years of nonlinear history* philosopher Manuel de Landa described human societies as having undergone a process of mineralisation. Pavements are a major result of that process, sedimenting routines and modes of being.

Pavements are the literal building blocks, crucial elements of

the modernist architecture most contemporary humans live in. However, they have recently become contested because of their climatic effects:

Pavements are extracted, accounting for a great part of the destructive carbonified practices of the building industry.

Pavements seal soils, turning into true guardians of the heat island effect and the degradation of metabolic functions or, better, the interspecies lives of ‘the great below.’

As a counterpoint, new initiatives aim to ‘de-pave’ our everyday terrains. Activist architects and planners have started unearthing the ‘beach beneath the street’, introducing porous materials and restoring soil intermingling

Yet, pavements were once urban rights—maybe still are. They raised walkable, levelled streets so gentry wouldn’t get their shoes muddy. Their precise standardisation in some places enabled wheelchair users to circulate. Pavements created *flâneurs*, creating bodies for urban walking, and not the other way around.

Pavements, in a nutshell, embody the right of everyone to walk everywhere, an incarnation of accessibility and free circulation. For this reason, in certain cities, like Barcelona or Lisbon, they have

become a signature object, protected as heritage:

Their most recognisable ones were made by famous architects, like Gaudí’s *panots*, or made by powerful and traditional guilds, like *calçeteiros*, that have given certain cities their allure, now important in their ‘branding’.

These patterns weren’t just decorative. Rather, this everyday infrastructure has turned out to be a collective urban asset.

But even celebrated pavements remain errant elements: synthetic and composite, as it happens with most construction materials, with a strange status; material orphans with no known connection to where they were extracted from or mixed in.

Concrete, asphalt, clay: they are the true urban proletariat, the ‘missing masses’ that Marxism overlooked, as well as other more contemporary traditions that have tended to simply attend to the social life of ‘objects’, not materials.

Oh, poor pavements. Unrecognised, untraceable, stepped-over. What would it mean to grant pavements a different kind of presence? To notice their agency, their temporality, their scars, their ecologies?





Beneath the pavement, the bricks

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Pd

Protactinium

*Work Cited*

De Landa, M. (1997) *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*. Zone Books.

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errant elements

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