



Forward from the External Editor

# **The Small Worlds That Keep Cities Alive**

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As we worked through curating this volume, we kept returning to a question: how do we notice what lives beneath the surface of the city? In architecture, we are taught to look at culture in large frames—civilizations, traditions, monuments. But the everyday city is held together by smaller, improvised worlds that do not fit into neat categories. These are subcultures.

They are not curiosities on the margins. They are infrastructures of daily life. They appear in repair shops that keep machines and houses alive but never find a place in textbooks; in the friendships that form during long train rides; in the festivals that stitch neighborhoods together; in the music and reading circles that carry ideas across generations. Subcultures remind us that cities are not only built through plans and policies but through improvisation, memory, and resistance.

For us as students and practitioners of design, subcultures are not optional. Architecture is never only about buildings—it is about the life that surrounds them. Without recognizing the practices and solidarities that sustain space, our work risks floating above reality.

Think of the city as constant repair. Every day, drains are unclogged, shrines repainted, walls patched, corners decorated. These acts are small, but they keep urban life going. Yet repair hardly appears in pedagogy. Subcultures bring these invisible labors into view.

They also reframe scale. A subculture may be rooted in a street corner but connected to global flows—rap in Hyderabad, reading groups in Bangalore, citizen science platforms online. They teach us that architecture must move between the intimate and the planetary.

To engage subcultures is also to adopt a way of seeing: listening to fragments, paying attention to details, sitting with ambiguity. A scrap of graffiti, a neighborhood ritual, a half-forgotten memory—each opens larger networks of meaning. For designers, such attentiveness is not extra work. It is the ground of practice.

Subcultures are never neutral. They carry exclusions as well as solidarities, hierarchies as well as freedoms. To pay attention to them is to ask who belongs, who is left out, what is remembered, and what is erased. This is central to architecture too: design decisions can either protect or destroy the fragile conditions that allow subcultures to thrive.

At the same time, subcultures are not only about the past. They are rehearsals of futures. The book circles of 1950s Bangalore, the repair economies of bazaars, the digital networks of today—all imagine new ways of living together.

### **This Issue**

This issue reflects that diversity in two ways. First, it spans a range of genres: essays and articles, interviews, poetry, illustrations, and a book review. Each form brings its own way of seeing and saying. Second, it spans a range of sites and contents: from farms and bazaars to parks and ponds, from train compartments to music studios, from inscription stones to neighborhood data platforms. Together these pieces show how subcultures thrive in places both ordinary and unexpected, and how they can be traced through very different registers of writing and making.

As editors, we invite you to read these contributions not for coherence but for resonance. Let them sharpen your ways of seeing, expand your sense of what counts as design, and remind you that the vitality of cities lies not only in their plans but in their subcultures—the small, improvised worlds that keep them alive.