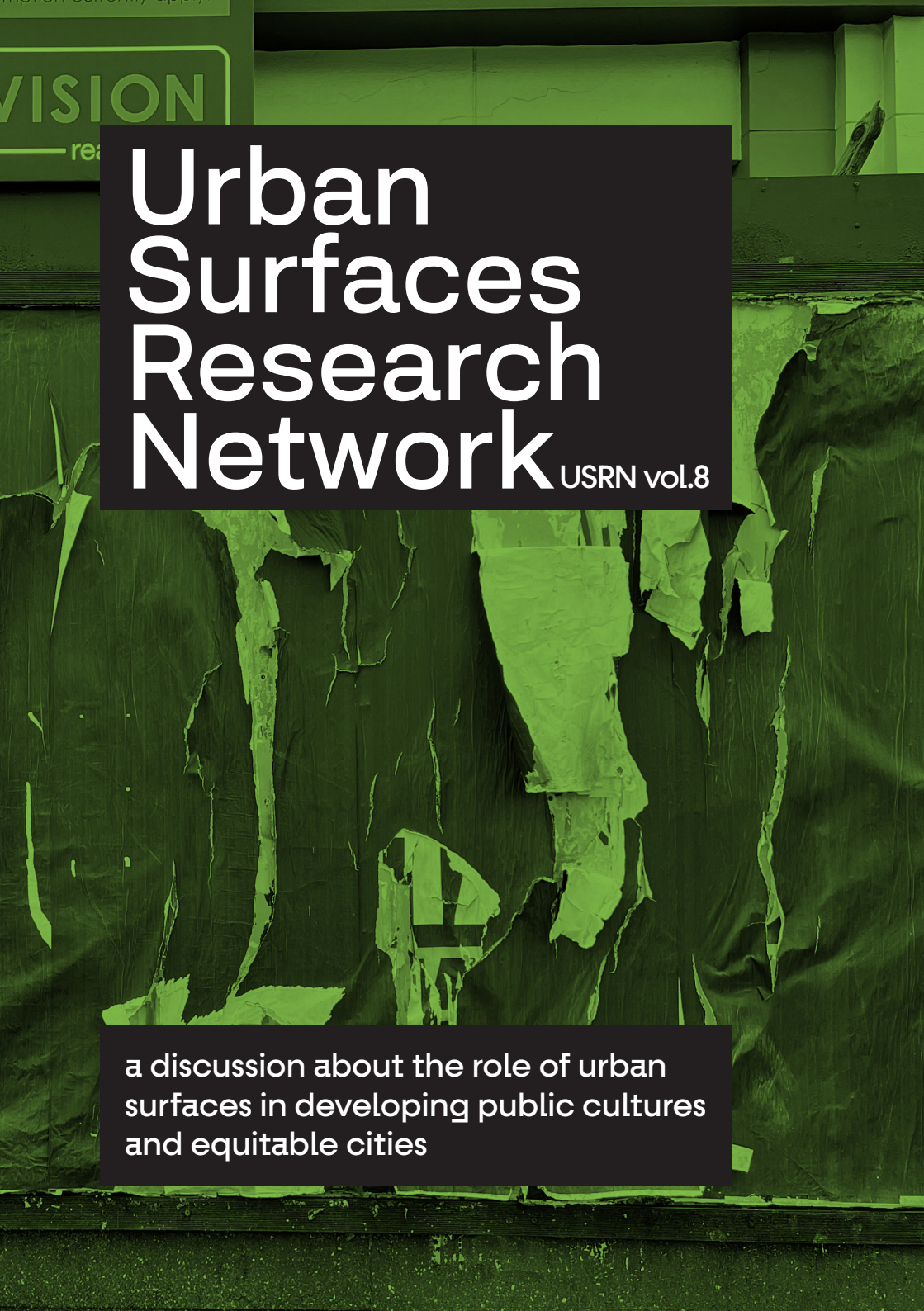

Urban Surfaces Research Network

USRN vol.8

a discussion about the role of urban surfaces in developing public cultures and equitable cities

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The Urban Surfaces Research Network Vol. 8 workshop took place online on 8 September 2026.

USRN project team: Sabina Andron, Konstantinos Avramidis, Tom Ward.
USRN website: https://urbansurfacesresearchnetwork.com/

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Proofreading: Tom Ward.

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Editorial

Urban surfaces are vital spaces of communication, governance, and political contestation. We established the Urban Surfaces Research Network (USRN) in 2023 as a conversation between an urban scholar in Australia - Sabina, an architectural designer in Cyprus - Konstantinos, and a geographer in Sweden – Tom, to explore the affordances of surfaces for a variety of urban questions.

Three years later, we have over 150 members in 36 countries and have held numerous online and in-person working sessions, including in-person workshops funded by an Urban Studies Foundation Seminar Series Award, conference sessions at the Society of Architectural Historians and Royal Geographical Society annual conferences, and online workshops and meetings.

This is the eighth publication from our series of USRN booklets, capturing contributions from our ongoing online Surface Conversations. Participants in these sessions responded to three prompts, which you will find in the following pages:

1. Define: How do you define urban surfaces in your field or practice?
2. Intervene: If you could change one thing about how urban surfaces are designed, valued, maintained, or governed—what would it be?
3. Challenge: What is a common misconception about urban surfaces that frustrates or limits your work?

The publication is intended to inform research, practice, and public discussions on the role of surfaces in urban environments. It contributes to our commitment to unite scholars from sociology, law, geography, architecture, heritage, design, and media to engage with the politics of urban surfaces.

We hope you enjoy your journey through these incredibly wide-ranging responses and share our enthusiasm for the work that has been done and that which lies ahead.

Sabina Andron, University of Melbourne
Konstantinos Avramidis, University of Cyprus
Tom Ward, Uppsala University

1. DEFINE: How do you define urban surfaces in your field or practice?

2. INTERVENE: If you could change one thing about how urban surfaces are designed, valued, maintained, or governed—what would it be?

3. CHALLENGE: What is a common misconception about urban surfaces that frustrates or limits your work?

Surface conversations vol. 8

Editors: Sabina Andron, Konstantions Avramidis, Tom Ward

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01

Adrienne Cacatian

1. Definition

A surface is a material form of boundary-making or -setting that primarily protects property, and is hence external and typically public-facing. Its maintenance is often invisibilised. Because it is material, it is apprehended by the senses. Because it is public-facing, it has an aesthetic component that fulfills social roles and subjective needs.

2. Intervention

In the Philippines, surfaces are often an afterthought or used only for marketing in public spaces, and treated as government property 'in the last instance.' Walls are usually high fences and gates, regarded as necessary due to the environment of political and economic insecurity and heightened fear of *akyat-bahay* (home burglary) in the country. Walls typically serve only to protect property, thus typically appearing plain and, in urban poor communities, 'neglected.' Ornamentation is few and far between; usually only middle and upper classes can afford them.

Walking around Marikina City in Metro Manila, a utilitarian treatment of surfaces and the greyness of the use, value, and even status of public space that extends to surfaces emerges. Walls are usually unadorned if not neutrally painted or used as advertising spaces, whether authorised or not. This leads to bare cement walls, the proliferation of marketing and electoral posters (even out of season), and/or the local government taking matters into its own hands by dismantling or erasing 'undesirable' markings and objects (known as buffing) along roads and surfaces. Surfaces along passable roads are especially vulnerable to self-authorised markings, including buffing by the local government, which is empowered by the state to do what it believes it must to uphold the wellbeing and comfort of residents.

I would like urban surfaces to become less utilitarian, less restricted by 'face'-oriented social, economic, and aesthetic values – especially if imposed by the local government. Ideally, urban surfaces are perceived more as commons than as individual responsibilities, especially given the greyness of surfaces along sidewalks and roads. Perhaps framing surfaces less as 'just' property and boundary-making and more as community resources and canvases could make people care more about their properties and environments *and* pay better attention and have a sense of ownership over their public spaces.

3. Misconception

Western-oriented definitions of public space and developments in methodology assume that all public space is simply public and all private property is private (thus, untouchable). For example, the International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) states that researchers may freely take photos in public space. By extension, it is assumed that there are clearly designated spaces where surfaces are treated simply as extensions of public space, and those where surfaces are strictly private. In the Philippines, public space, urban surfaces, and their uses are complex: due to small living spaces and communal life, many Filipinos 'privatise' public space while governments turn private property public. Urban surfaces are in this grey area as they protect private property while being part *and* boundary of public space. In Western countries, this matter is carefully tread upon by authorities, either by leaving surfaces to the owner's discretion *or* by asking for authorisation to alter them.

In Metro Manila, this tension is highlighted in the legal code that empowers local governments to do what they perceive is necessary to maintain and discipline their cities, including overriding and undermining the power of owners over their own properties. In my research on vandalism and erasure in Marikina City, surfaces that protect private property become both the responsibility of, and a power resource of, local government. Part of this is a persistent anti-vandalism policy that 'informally' involves buffing, even on private property. While this service is free of charge, property owners pay for it in political and aesthetic value: they do not have any formal or official power to choose the way vandalism is erased on their property, thus merely tolerating the bold colors and big geometric shapes of the buff. The status of urban surfaces is not clear-cut, perhaps especially in collectivist societies – they exist in limbo, as both private property and public space.



02

Ange Glindemann

1. Definition

As a wandering writer/researcher, I think of urban surfaces in relation to what they do. A surface is, in some senses, a border zone – an outer boundary or limit – but it does many other things. Surfaces reflect and absorb light and sounds; carry textures, patternings; emanate heat; yield dust and dirt and other traces.

2. Intervention

I don't write *on* surfaces, but I do write *with* them, following Donna Haraway.

My writing practice, these days, is inspired by the figure of the flâneuse – walking in urban settings, contemplating and observing. Where I differ a little from these wandering traditions is that I have tried to practice longer moments of lingering – or staying, as I call it, again following Donna Haraway. In our current moment, during which much has been said about the frenetic pace of everyday life and the lack of genuine third spaces, sometimes it feels important to slow down and see what happens. As a writer, I aim to create work that further interacts with everyday urban settings. I think a lot, for instance, about the surface of the page and the way it changes as it receives and responds to the lights, shadows and air patterns in a given location.

I started working towards this ambient writing practice some years ago, wandering around a business district near my then-workplace. I wanted to turn my creative attention towards the lobbies and car parks and food courts I was wandering through, precisely because I found them exhausting.

My initial interest was in understanding a little more about these locations that I was passing through, which felt intended to blend into the background, but which spoke so very loudly to me. In my journeys, I often encountered perceptions of metal-on-metal, wind tunnels, and dreary colourless surfaces that together impacted my wellbeing. I am not an architect or an urban planner; I'm not often in a position to choose the shape and sound of the built environments I inhabit, but through my writing practice, I hope, in a small way, to intervene in these surfaces by considering my writing practice – and reading practice – as also a design practice.

3. Misconception

When I mention to peers in the creative writing field that I work in situ – and that my outlook is ecological – I have often encountered well-meaning offers for us to go somewhere more scenic. I have observed in these interactions an often unconscious turning away from the environs that, for many of us, form the context of our daily lives. But the thing is, while we can turn away from them, they're still there, affecting us and the others – human and nonhuman – entangled with them.

I think, then, that it is important to closely observe precisely those things we might be socialised to disregard. The practical problem with doing this, though, is that it is sometimes quite hard to hang around and stare at a concrete wall, for artistic purposes, without someone thinking there's something wrong. This kind of lingering tends to be re-characterised as loitering. Writers have a long tradition of doing exactly this; there's a book I love called *Loiterature*. But that doesn't make any of this easier to explain when you're out in public being – for all intents and purposes – pretty weird.

I'm an introverted and private kind of writer, but through this in situ practice, I have found myself contemplating the performative aspect of creating in (or with) these kinds of locations. In addition to being that fuzzy boundary I mentioned earlier, a surface is also an appearance. I am often making appearances – and this gentle resistance to that aforementioned misconception (that we should go somewhere more scenic) has become part of the activist orientation I bring to my urban wandering writing practice.



03

Ato Jackson

1. Definition

As an artist, I am interested in the image as a medium that mediates our everyday experiences and perceptions. I define the urban surface as a site, or a kind of image, that mediates daily experience within the cityscape, where architecture, people, movement, and the traces of everyday life become visible and meaningful. In my practice, the urban surface is therefore not merely a physical structure, but a visual and experiential space through which the city is encountered, interpreted, and remembered.

2. Intervention

If I could change one thing about how urban surfaces are designed, valued, maintained, and governed, I would change how they are understood – from static physical structures to living records of the people and communities that inhabit them. A specific example can be found in the constant patching, demolition, rebuilding, and modification of buildings and streets in Accra, Ghana. A wall may be repaired with a different material, painted over, covered with advertisements, broken open for a new entrance, or eventually demolished. These interventions are often treated as necessary maintenance or development, but they can also erase traces of everyday life and the histories embedded within a place. There is therefore a point of friction between development and continuity. Urban surfaces need to accommodate economic growth and changing needs, but in the process the social and historical value of existing spaces can easily be overlooked. A repaired wall, an improvised extension, a worn staircase, or a modified storefront may appear aesthetically insignificant, yet these surfaces can carry evidence of occupation, adaptation, livelihood, memory, and displacement. I would therefore advocate for urban surfaces to be valued not only according to their economic or functional usefulness, but also according to their social, cultural, ecological, and aesthetic histories. Maintenance should not always mean replacing or erasing. Sometimes it could mean preserving, layering, adapting, or allowing existing traces to remain visible.

3. Misconception

A common misconception about urban surfaces that frustrates and limits my work is the idea that they are neutral, merely physical structures that can be easily destroyed, replaced, or redesigned without consequence. I see the urban surface differently. It is not neutral; it carries the daily narratives of the city and records the traces of the people, activities, movements, conflicts, changes, and memories that pass through it. A wall, building, street, pavement, or storefront is not simply a material object but a surface upon which everyday life is continuously written, erased, and rewritten.

I think of the urban surface as a kind of teacher or schoolmaster, one that appears to know almost everything because it has witnessed and absorbed so much, yet continues to learn. It learns from the people who occupy it, modify it, repair it, abandon it, and return to it. Its cracks, patches, stains, alterations, demolitions, and layers become forms of knowledge that reveal how the city changes over time.

This understanding challenges the tendency to value urban surfaces only through their economic, functional, or aesthetic usefulness. When a surface is destroyed or replaced, we may also be losing a repository of collective experience. My practice is therefore concerned with looking closely at these surfaces and translating their accumulated narratives into images. Through painting, fragmentation, layering, and reconstruction, I attempt to make

visible what is often overlooked: the urban surface as an active participant in the production of memory, identity, and everyday experience. It becomes both an archive and a continually evolving lesson about the city and its inhabitants.


Credit:
Ben Marans
食得樂
Coca-Cola
04
Billy
Potts

1. Definition

An urban surface is any site of inscription where a city's past lives are made visible. My work concerns which surfaces count: the agreed definition of a ghost sign—fifty years old, painted on brick—was written for Europe and America, and rules out the Asian street before it can even be considered.

2. Intervention

My intervention is insisting that artefacts like ghost signage are inherently valuable, separate from the buildings that carry them.

In Hong Kong, signage and wall-writing have almost no protection of their own. Buildings are graded; the writing on them is not. Density, housing need and land value mean the structure often cannot stay. When it goes, the surface goes with it, usually unrecorded.

The record of a surface can outlive its volume. When a building cannot be kept, its surfaces can still be documented, salvaged or reinterpreted. This is not a consolation prize but a part that carries signs of ordinary life.

Through our efforts and those of fellow researchers, this is starting to happen. We now receive requests from public redevelopment authorities to identify architectural materials and artefacts on and inside buildings scheduled for demolition that might be preserved or reinterpreted when considering what will replace the buildings in question. A decade ago that question might not have been put to people who study, record or preserve signs.

We have used ghost signs to open up several facets of Hong Kong's society and past. We have examined the history of public health through painted-over cigarette advertisements, and interpreted the Second World War through signage found inside abandoned defensive positions. Signage left over from the defunct Urban Council has yielded a detailed and rare account of Hong Kong's design history, and insight into the city's present-day civic branding.

The case I am making is that surfaces are not mere decoration or trivia on a city that has moved on. Surfaces put the past into conversation with the present. A city can acknowledge what it was without being held prisoner by it. That is only possible if someone records and considers the traces that carry this foundational information.

3. Misconception

The misconception is that this work is backwards-looking; a curio of old Hong Kong. A trivial leftover, unworthy of being considered real heritage.

What I am documenting is a foundational cultural structure: how this city wrote itself onto its walls and how that writing was dismissed as commercial noise.

Through our work we hope to make this valuable cultural record more visible and easier to understand in aggregate. Our mapping platform hkghostsigns.com is a systematic archive of artefacts that appear too small to notice individually. When considered together, they paint a very different picture, offering insight that cannot be gleaned from looking at one or two examples in isolation. This is a record of ordinary people experiencing and moving through the city in different time periods. These signs were never trivial to those people who commissioned and painted them. To them, these signs were a claim to physical space, a public declaration of who they were and what they did. The signs themselves contain unwritten cultural information enshrined in design vernacular, superstition, societal conventions and history. They were made trivial by a hierarchy that only counts monuments and a chosen few who are considered to be monumental and worthy of honour. The people connected to the signs that we consider may not make it into history books. Nobody builds monuments to them, but they are commemorated in the traces they left behind.

The work looks at the past because that is the foundation. The present and future are built on that foundation. It still organises how we read the street.

The myth is that studying and understanding old signs is unserious. Now that redevelopment authorities ask sign researchers what should be kept from the buildings they seek to demolish, the question of seriousness has been settled.



'Melbourne Central 2021 3D Photomesh' dataset, partially rendered, in Digital Twin Victoria, screenshot by the author. DTV © State of Victoria (Department of Transport and Planning), 3D model licensed from Woolpert © Woolpert.

05

Emma McRae

1. Definition

In my work, digital representations of the city and the urban imaginaries they produce are urban surfaces that sit between our perception and the city itself. These surfaces, constructed from computational data, often visualise a coherent, efficient, and frictionless city that contributes to urban decision making and has material effects on the construction of the city itself.

3. Misconception

My research has involved studying the digital visualisations presented within urban digital twins: real-time, geolocated, 3D models that visualise the city through computational data. In representing the city through digital data, these visualisations obscure elements of urban life that fall through digital cracks – all the things that are unrepresentable within the standardised systems through which this urban representation is constructed. These things include gendered, Indigenous, and non-normative knowledges, histories, and experiences of the city. They also include things that cause friction in the city, that can hinder, disrupt or block passage and are felt in people's bodies as they move through the city. These include our own and other people's emotions, thoughts, morals, stories, and beliefs, other people themselves, and many of the numerous non-human entities and processes that are also lively parts of the city. The absence of these things from visualisations that are increasingly used for urban decision making contributes to their invisibility within the imaginaries upon which urban decisions are based.

A common misconception about these digital visualisations, and the urban imaginary they produce, is that they are representations of the real world. This misconception is stuck in a notion of representationalism, within which representations and what they claim to represent are perceived to be independent entities. Yet, digital representations are entangled sociotechnical practices, constructed from and contributing to material changes in the world. In an urban digital twin, bi-directional flows of real-time data connect the model and the 'real' city, complicating this supposed separation. Yet connection here is a computational process within which only data that can be represented through digital standards and systems can be visualised. The urban experience encountered in these visualisations enables interaction with—and constructs an expectation of—a frictionless city. This experience contributes to perpetuating an imaginary of urban management and control, within which the city is imagined, and then enacted, as an ordered and efficient place within which frictions can be resolved.

2. Intervention

Changing how this surface, the urban imaginary and its digital progenitors, is designed, constructed and maintained requires increasing recognition of the multiple ways of being, living and knowing that don't fit, and which can't be represented, within the frictionless, digital representation. Doing so requires resisting the fast-paced, future-oriented momentum of technoscientific narratives and accepting that interruptions, delays, discomfort, difference, and friction are all part of urban life.

One method of disrupting the (mis)conception of representationalism and the myth of the frictionless city is a process I call 'seeing otherwise'. This involves paying attention to interruptions (including network lags and rendering delays) that can disrupt the resolution of data into the expected, coherent image of the city. For a user of an urban digital twin whose goal is to build and inhabit the frictionless city, these interruptions are often perceived as steps on the path towards achieving the coherent city; they are ignored and become invisible.

Paying attention to these interruptions, however, can reveal the coherent, frictionless city as a myth constructed and maintained through the materialities (including networks, devices, and human bodies) and expectations created through the digital urban imaginary. These moments reveal that things do not always behave as expected; they provide an opportunity for recognising the limits of the digital city as the surface through which to perceive, imagine, and make decisions that result in material changes in the city itself. In doing so, these moments open a space for perceiving and conceiving of alternative urban imaginaries.

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Credits:
Evelyn Jeny Mad-umitha
Vandhana R
Roshini Ra-jmohan

06

Esther Kiruba
Jebakumar Clifford

1. Definition

An urban surface is more than a wall, pavement or façade. It is the primary point of contact between the designed environment and the people who inhabit it. It is a canvas for collective memory, manifesting as cultural expressions, social awareness, political statements, temporal palimpsests, and linguistic surfaces.

3. Misconception

The main challenge as an educator is that urban surfaces are seen by students primarily as commercial assets. They begin their urban studies with the settled view that a wall simply exists and can be used as a canvas for advertisements. The surface, in this framing, is a rentable asset: hoarding space, retail frontage, or at minimum a maintenance liability to be managed efficiently. This is not an error made by students. It is modelled by professional life and encoded in policy.

Signage byelaws in most cities contain detailed and enforceable frameworks for commercial expression on surfaces, covering dimensions, illumination, consent and removal. The same byelaws contain no equivalent framework for community expression. An advertising hoarding is given legal status and a clear governance route, whereas a community mural on the same surface is given none of these. It may be tolerated, even celebrated, but it sits outside the regulatory architecture that governs the surface it occupies. At Indira Nagar railway station in Chennai, India, hundreds of metres of public surface that once carried an AIDS awareness campaign now carry an advertisement for a soft drink. The failing is not that commercial use of surfaces is permitted. It is that commercial value is the only kind of surface value that most frameworks are equipped to see and protect. Social value, cultural value and the capacity of a surface to hold a community's own account of itself are not legible to those instruments. A surface can actively shape what becomes visible, whose stories are represented and how people experience a place. Policy has to be able to say so.

2. Intervention

The way urban surfaces are valued and governed has to change. The façades of buildings in Kannagi Nagar and Pattinapakkam, Chennai, carry murals authored by the communities living among them. These are working neighbourhoods, and the painted surfaces are read alongside the market stalls, the drying laundry, the boats and the everyday traffic of the street, forming part of the urban fabric rather than an addition to it. Women are painted over four storeys, holding flowers, working, looking directly at the street and Tamil phrases on the elevation. Stories of fishermen are painted and vividly expressed across multiple buildings. The social and cultural value here is not incidental to the project: it is the project itself. Under most planning frameworks, this kind of intervention is classified as beautification or public amenity. This is an aesthetic framing, and occasionally an economic one. It captures none of the communicative function, the community authorship or the political weight of what these surfaces are doing. The values at stake are social, cultural and communicative: the capacity of a surface to represent a community to itself, and to a city that has not always wanted to see it. These values do not appear as line items in a development brief or a maintenance budget, and because they are not legible to governance they are not protected by it. When a building is sold or a precinct is redeveloped, the loss is recorded nowhere. What is proposed here is not a new consent pathway added onto existing frameworks. It is a shift in what those frameworks are built to recognise. Surfaces have to be governed as sites of community authorship rather than as assets that need to be kept clean, controlled or visually ordered. Until this shift is made, the most significant work that urban surfaces do will remain, in policy terms, invisible.



Design-build workshop for the iThemba Walkway Memory Wall. Photograph: Kathryn Ewing

07

Kathryn Ewing

1. Definition

From the perspective of Southern urbanism and participatory design, urban surfaces are thresholds to relational and social infrastructure. A surface is never merely a material boundary; it is a co-produced artefact, made and remade through collective memory, everyday spatial negotiation and community action. Urban surfaces are not simply sites of representation. Through collective surface-making, they become infrastructures of repair that support belonging, authorship, and more just urban futures.

2. Intervention

The values at stake here are social, pedagogical and emotional rather than economic or aesthetic. If I could change one thing, it would be to shift the identification, governance and valuation of urban surfaces in public space away from being viewed as peripheral, negative or informal spaces, labelled as maintenance-heavy or security liabilities, towards being recognised as auto-constructed (Caldeira, 2017; Roy, 2011) infrastructures of repair (Bhan, 2019).

The iThemba Walkway Memory Wall in Gugulethu, Cape Town, illustrates the affordances of this shift. Through community clean-up campaigns, map-making activities, co-design workshops, storytelling exercises and design-build days involving active citizens, stakeholders, researchers and urban design students, a neglected boundary wall was transformed over five years into a collectively-authored public asset. The process translated local knowledge into co-produced material form while strengthening ownership and care.

The Memory Wall facilitates reflection and healing across a century-long timeline, translating the community's shared history, from painful local tragedies to celebratory milestones, into a material archive that nurtures identity and opens dialogue about justice and resilience. In doing so, the wall becomes a catalyst for community agency and responsibility: a platform for circulating intergenerational knowledge about contextual record and social life. Every year on Freedom Day in South Africa, the collective of partners and students participate in adding layers, dates and details to the wall, with recent temporal extensions across the floor.

By valuing surface-making interventions as reparative social infrastructure, cities can move beyond large-scale, top-down projects towards incremental, citizen-anchored urban design. Such approaches support spatial equity by creating safe, friendly and inclusive public spaces, whilst strengthening local stewardship and collective agency.

3. Misconception

The misconception that most limits this work is that residual urban spaces are not public space at all. Left-over urban space—the residual wall, the setback, the servitude, the service lane—are not counted as public space by municipalities or by citizens. It sits on no register or zoning map of public open space and falls under no department's mandate or budget. Residents do not wish to claim such abandoned space either, being labelled in local isiXhosa as "iRhanga", as an unloved passage. Unrecognised, it goes unmaintained, further becoming a dangerous space and a site of dumping, violent crime and anti-social behaviour, which then appears to confirm that it was never public space at all.

These residues are, in fact, among the most intensely used public spaces in the city. iThemba Walkway carries daily movement to and from the local primary school and access to Nyanga Junction train station in Gugulethu South, precisely because it is the shortest route in the neighbourhood. Originally constructed as a 50-metre long and 6-metre wide service lane for access to stormwater, sanitation and water pipes, this connection to the residential urban block was designed in the apartheid urban planning era, and was not intended as a public space. There are minimal municipal interventions, apart from three streetlights and bollards to restrict vehicular movement. Private homes have occupied the boundary to the passage, building backyard concrete walls and rudimentary barriers for safety.

The iThemba Walkway recognised the potential of, and acted on the repair of, the edges as dynamic mediums for education, storytelling and safety messages. The Memory Wall did not make the corridor safer simply because it introduced murals, portraits, text, or commemorative markers. Rather, the collective making, repair, and continued activation of the surface transformed how the walkway was understood and inhabited. Through shared authorship, ongoing maintenance, and public visibility, the walkway became legible as public space. Urban surfaces are therefore not the backdrop to urban life; they are places where active citizens make themselves visible, audible, and enduring.

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Caldeira, T. P. (2017). Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(1), 3–20.

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08

Preeti Mudliar

1. Definition

The urban surface in my project is the rear panel of the autorickshaw. It contains a rectangular opening with rounded edges designed to give the driver rear visibility. Drivers frequently appropriate this space for advertising or personal expression. I approach this rear surface as a mobile urban screen..

2. Intervention

I document one particular appropriation of these surfaces: autorickshaw drivers displaying images of Bollywood film stars in the city of Bangalore, India. I think of the rear of the auto as a mobile screen upon which drivers stage and perform fandom. My film archive project on Instagram, Silver Screen to Auto Screens, therefore asks a deliberately playful question: "So, you are a Bollywood star—but are you star enough for an auto?"

Space on an auto has competing values. It has regulatory value because rear visibility is supposed to be maintained and drivers are fined for covering it. It has commercial value because it can carry paid advertising. Yet, some drivers give that economically useful space to film stars they love. They pay for images to be painted or printed, often update the images to correspond to a star's new film look, and risk penalties for displaying them.

For the auto driver, displaying a film star's image on an auto therefore represents expenditure and risk when using the auto's back panel in making an affective attachment to a film star public. Which star gets to occupy that space and in what form is therefore very consequential. These displays can also assert the driver's presence on the road, giving the rear surface other kinds of values in flaunting their fandom: pride, prestige, and public self-presentation.

The governance of the auto screen encounters friction. Drivers repeatedly cover the transparent auto panel for commercial advertising as well as personal expression. Drivers I have interviewed describe paying bribes to retain their images. Regulation therefore encounters an entrenched vernacular practice. Instead of treating it as regulatory non-compliance by auto drivers, I treat it as a design question: before assuming the regulation is necessary, could we empirically establish how much rear visibility through that opening actually contributes to safe driving? Can the autorickshaw be redesigned to preserve rear visibility while formally accommodating a surface that drivers clearly value as expressive and economic space?

3. Misconception

There is more to traffic than is commonly noted. Urban traffic is generally discussed through congestion, travel time, pollution, road quality, accidents and safety. Bangalore was ranked the world's second-most congested city in TomTom's 2025 Traffic Index (TomTom, 2025). Those are obviously significant and important understandings of traffic, but treating traffic only as a vexing mobility issue obscures other things happening within it.

For my film archives on auto screens project, congestion isn't simply an urban mobility problem. Traffic produces conditions of spectatorship through vehicular movement as well as traffic lights and traffic jams when commuters are temporarily arrested and look around them.

I argue that traffic carries its own aesthetics. Autorickshaws make traffic visually expressive. Their rear surfaces circulate images in the form of witty lines, allegiances, advertisements, religious iconography, political attachments and film fandom through the city. In my project, they become tiny moving galleries of Indian cinema. And because drivers continue displaying stars from different periods, they also function as live, dynamic, archives of India's rich cinematic memory.

A star appearing on an auto years after a film's release tells us something different from a star appearing in a current advertising campaign. Auto surfaces as urban surfaces preserve and recirculate the afterlives of films, songs and stars long after their original moment of circulation. So, rather than thinking of roads as simply infrastructures through which people and vehicles move, my project asks us to think about what images, memories and attachments move with them and the aesthetic and archival value they produce.

TomTom. (2025). *Bengaluru traffic: TomTom Traffic Index*. https://www.tomtom.com/traffic-index/city/bengaluru/



09

Tuba Doğu

1. Definition

At the Crack Institute (instagram.com/crackinstitute), an artistic research platform, we define urban surfaces as physical and metaphorical cracks, sites of (im)perfection, resistance, and ecological possibility. From minuscule cracks in everyday surfaces to macro-irregularities visible in satellite images, they are spaces where nature writes itself and where forms of life deemed out-of-place can circulate, revealing what modernity struggles to organise and control.

2. Intervention

If we could change one thing about how urban surfaces are valued and maintained, we would change the tendency of legal entities to eliminate surface flaws. Rather than treating the surface as contributing to a manicured landscape that must be continuously restored, we would intervene in the maintenance practices capable of recognising its ecological, material, and social potential.

Our project *Infrastructure Scars* offers one starting point. It looks at patches and repairs produced by infrastructure interventions on asphalt surfaces. Usually read as defects, these scars can instead reveal otherwise invisible networks of water, telecommunications, gas, and other infrastructures. The surface becomes an archive of the city's continuous processes of construction, repair, and transformation.

We extend this approach towards more-than-human life in *Junk Ecologies*. Cracks can become unintended ecological niches where soil, water, plants, insects, and other forms of life gather and interact. Yet, in the eyes of the public, wild plants growing from within cracks are often perceived as disrupting the idealised image of a homogeneous and manicured cityscape, while concerns around public safety are used to justify their removal. Seasonal removal of urban weeds consequently reinforces the distinction between what is considered an acceptable urban landscape and what is treated as an unwanted intrusion.

We would intervene in this perceptual logic of mechanical eradication. Instead of removing vegetation emerging from cracks, maintenance could distinguish between harmful and harmless, allowing certain forms of spontaneous life to persist. This would shift maintenance from restoring a predetermined aesthetic condition towards responding to the specific ecological and material conditions of each surface. The intervention, then, is less about designing another type of surface and more about changing how we perceive and maintain the ones we already have. In doing so, ecological and social values can become part of maintenance decisions alongside functional and aesthetic ones..

3. Misconception

At the Crack Institute, we challenge the assumption that urban surfaces need to be smooth, clean, continuous, and controlled. They are commonly understood as finished layers, while anything that lies beneath, emerges through, or escapes them is treated as a problem to be repaired, sealed, or removed. This reduces the surface to a boundary and obscures the processes that continually produce and transform it.

We approach cracks not only as material conditions, but also as spatial and political ones. They reveal what can become visible, inhabit a space, or persist within the city. At a smaller scale, a crack in asphalt can collect soil and water, allowing plants or insects to take root. At a larger scale, spatial ruptures and leftover spaces can create opportunities for occupation, encounter, and commoning that exceed planned urban order.

What this misconception overlooks is that surfaces are never truly finished. They are continually altered by infrastructures, materials, weather, other species, and human practices. The apparent stability of the urban surface is therefore maintained through ongoing acts of repair, removal, and regulation that determine what is allowed to remain and what must disappear. Nevertheless, what appears to be a stable and continuous layer is, in fact, a record of constant disturbance.

The misconception, then, is not simply that cracks are undesirable. It is the belief that a successful urban surface is one that conceals change. We instead see surfaces as active conditions that register the multiple forces, materials, and practices through which cities are continually made and re-made. It unsettles the idea of the surface as a fixed boundary and opens a broader question: what kinds of urban life become possible when we attend to, rather than suppress, the ruptures through which the city continually changes?



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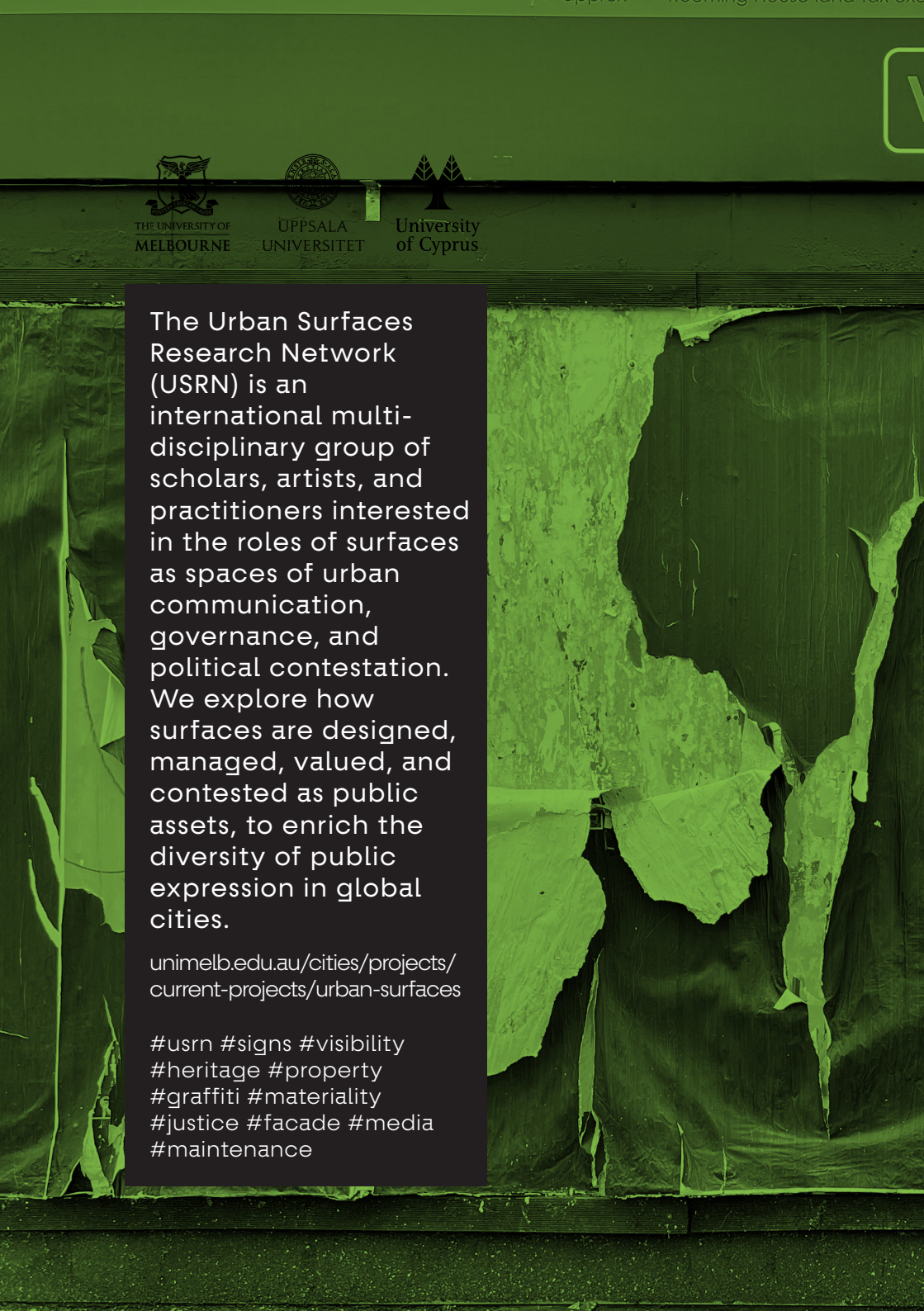

The Urban Surfaces Research Network (USRN) is an international multi-disciplinary group of scholars, artists, and practitioners interested in the roles of surfaces as spaces of urban communication, governance, and political contestation. We explore how surfaces are designed, managed, valued, and contested as public assets, to enrich the diversity of public expression in global cities.

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