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Junk

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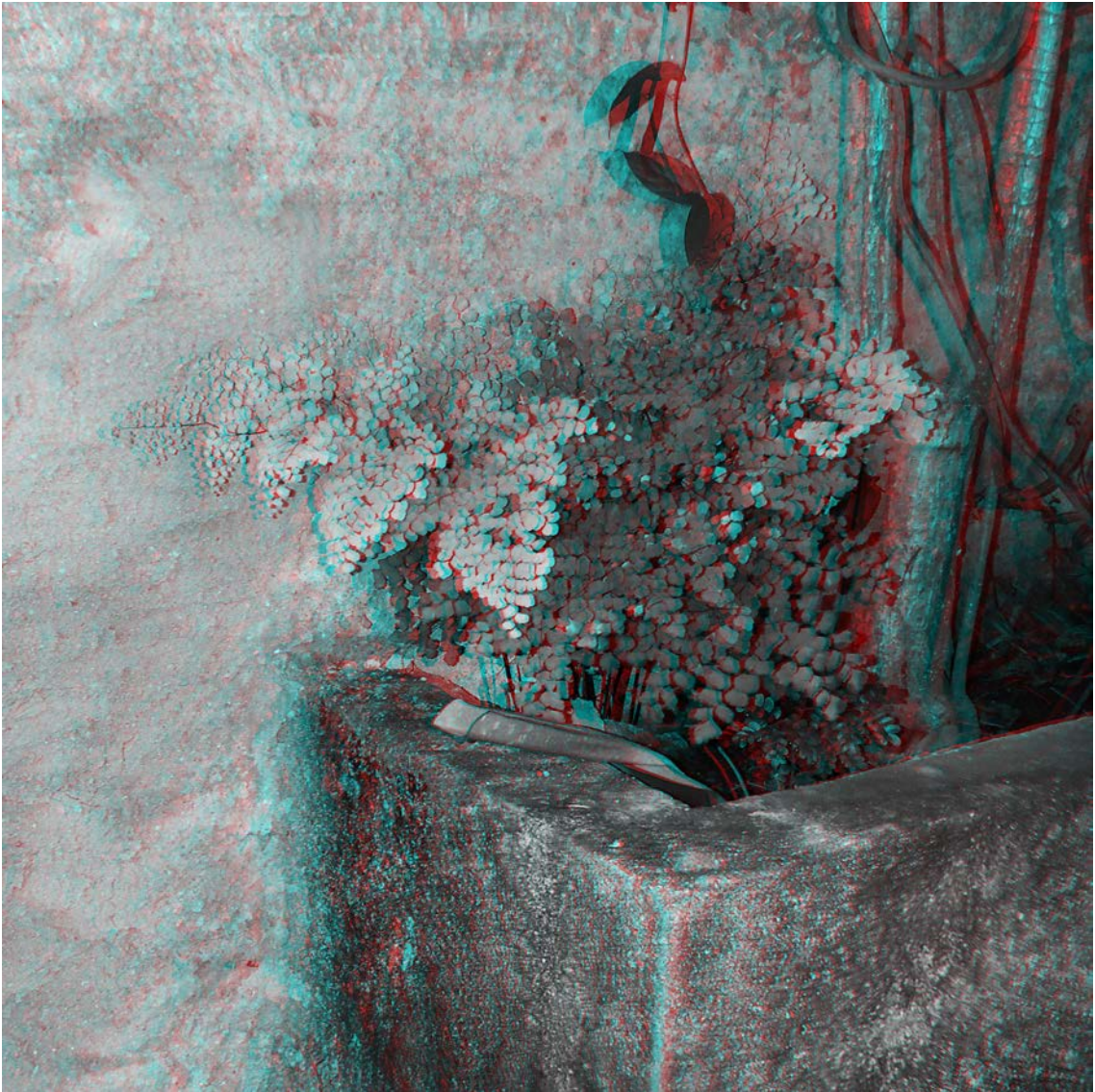
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*No Life, No Death, No End, No Nothing — Just Feed*









# Taking root in cracks

## Junk ecologies of the urban

**Tuba Doğu,**  
**Melis Baloğlu**

The oracle bone script was a form of divination practiced during the Late Shang dynasty in ancient China.<sup>1</sup> Questions concerning harvests, state affairs, and weather were carved into ox bones and turtle shells, which were then exposed to heat. Due to thermal expansion, the bones cracked open, and it was through these fissures that prognostication took place. Interpreted as a form of “nature’s writing” (Snyder, 1990, p. 66), the reading of these cracks is considered the earliest form of systematic Chinese writing. Centuries later, this essay seeks to trace a similar path of nature’s prognostication — this time attempting for a reading through the small-scale cracks of the urban fabric.

Just as fire-etched ancient bone cracks were once signifiers of nature’s writing, so today’s urban cracks — between cobblestones, along roadsides, and across concrete surfaces — reveal messages of wilderness taking root from within. The primary force in this process is nature itself, driven by a force of life embedded within a seed, which remains dormant until favorable conditions arise. These conditions are not met in controlled settings; rather, they signal the beginning of a vital process in unpredictable urban environments, where everyday surface cracks become hosts for spontaneous plants and their resulting wild landscapes (Seiter, 2016; Del Tredici, 2014). Cracks serve as conduits that conceal, nurture, and circulate plants deemed as out of place, allowing urban wilderness to reclaim space through what can be considered as junk ecologies.

Cracks, like the junk ecologies they foster, occur in unintended ways. They are residues of urban spaces that modernity struggles to organize and control. As Gilles Clément puts it, “all spatial organisation generates a neglected space” (2004, p.7). The crack of neglect, whether resulting from climatic stress, lack of maintenance, or daily wear, appears on the surface as a flaw in the material, turning it into an indistinct void. It offers, as Brighenti (2013) puts it, the “possibility — at the very least — of some fresh air to breathe that flows through the otherwise asphyxiating landscape of the corporate city” (p. xvii). Since the conditions that give rise to cracks also inform the ecologies they inhabit, a mutual cycle emerges. Each generates the other, creating a paradox of neglect and resistance, erosion and flourishing, making it impossible to discuss one in isolation from the other. What renders these ecologies junk? And what possibilities arise upon a shift in perception? With the emergence of junk ecologies in the overlooked cracks of the urban landscape, this essay probes two interwoven scenes: 1) their perception in the eyes of the public; and, 2) their unexpected yet crucial contribution in tending to the very cracks they inhabit.

### Losing Control

Standing in contrast to the dominant aesthetics of controlled urban landscapes, an urban wilderness

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<sup>1</sup> See Oracle Bone Script, <https://asia-archive.si.edu/learn/chinas-calligraphic-arts/oracle-bone-script/>

poetically takes root within cracks, transforming them into “third landscapes”, a “territory of biological invention” which hosts natural accidents (Clément, 2004, p. 10–28). Spontaneous plants, moisture, moss, infrastructure, and insects form sympoietic systems — “making-with” or “worlding-with” in Donna Haraway’s terms (2016) — in which human-mediated and non-human collectively form a whole. Urban landscapes thus emerge as sites of uncontrolled, collaborative flourishing between diverse species.

Life in these cracks is an ongoing process of kinship-making through oppositions: concrete and waste, asphalt and seeds, stone and rainwater. While junk is suspended between artificial and natural, impervious and permeable, domestication and wildness, it is not dead; rather, it composts in the urban environment to give rise to new forms of life. In this state of suspension, between what happens on the surface and what lies beneath, a “creative formlessness” emerges (Douglas, 1966, p. 162). While junk, considered as a by-product of imposed order, is a formlessness that is surrounded by the interplay of form (Douglas, 1966, p. 105–161), junk ecologies have an agentic potential in themselves, able to enact a creative performance of nature’s own making. This is because junk is separated neither from cracks nor from the ecology it sustains, constituting a relational field.

Much like Mary Douglas’s notion of impurity, that marks a residual category rejected from the normal scheme of categorization (1966, p. 37), the constituents of junk ecologies are not fixed; they shift with context, evolving out of human control as they strive to reach (beyond) the surface toward the sun. Outside of normative identifications and as plants “in the wrong place” (Mabey, 2012, p.5), this double contingency prevents us from forming a consistent perception of them. Intriguingly, junk ecologies, fed by society’s shifting perception, appears to be reinforced by the legal entities of overlooked cracks. Urban authorities normally perceive wild plants as disrupting the idealized image of a homogeneous and manicured cityscape. Ironically, the seasonal removal of weeds not only reinforces their status as unwanted intruders — marking them as something to be controlled — but also underscores municipal efforts to maintain that very image. Their designation as undesirable stems from a social imaginary shaped by rigid landscape norms (Seaton, 2021), while their criminalization reflects the threat they are assumed to pose to a manmade urban order (Cooking Sections, 2018). Citing public safety, aesthetics, pest management, and fire prevention, these perceptions justify their eradication, aligning with the prevailing tendency to eliminate rather than engage with or understand such organic life-forms (Kimmerer, 2003).

Urban weed control, in fact, is publicly framed as a means of providing a service to the city. While this claim is by no means universal, a quick online search in our context, Türkiye, reveals how such services are legitimized through the websites and social media accounts of many municipalities. It is through these ongoing political campaigns that the removal of weeds emerging from cracks is justified as a necessary labor aimed at containing the spread of junk ecologies, declared commonly and repeatedly as “wasteful”, “causing visual pollution”, and something to be “battled against”, with the headlines calling for “solidarity” “to clear away for livable cities”:<sup>2</sup>

Despite public perception through mediated presence dismiss junk ecologies, recent artistic research practices have taken an interest in their presence, not as urban blights to be ignored or suppressed, but rather as vital elements of urban life that should be acknowledged and embraced. Presenting a selection of wild urban plants that define these vital spaces, *Spontaneous Urban Plants: Weeds in NYC* (2016) by Future Green Studio poses a central question: Is it possible to reassess the positive contributions of wild urban plants that grow untouched by human hands, despite their negative perception? Since 2011, the studio has investigated the role of weeds within urban ecosystems, identifying species that thrive along roadsides, fence lines, and sidewalk cracks, and shares these

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2 For further details, refer to the Newspaper Articles subsection in the References.



findings with city dwellers in an effort to shift the prevailing negative view of urban weeds (Seaton, 2021). In a similar vein, the *More Than Weeds* project,<sup>3</sup> launched in 2019 by London-based botanist Sophie Leguil, aims to change public perception of urban plants growing on walls, pavements, and in tree pits. Through guided walks and social media accounts and using tools as simple as chalk to label the names of these wild plants, Leguil encourages passersby to identify and engage with these junk ecologies thriving in urban cracks.

Yet the observational ground for these artistic efforts is not entirely new. In 1974, *Wild Plants in the City* (Page & Weaver, 1974) offered a handbook for identifying the features of wild plants growing spontaneously in the cracks of otherwise highly-planned urban environments. The authors characterized wild plants' aggressive nature as vigorous, adaptable, and tenacious; and framed their presence as a welcome improvement over wastelands that are signs of neglect and poor management. Three decades later, another field guide — *Wild Urban Plants of the Northeast* (Del Tredici, 2014) followed a similar perspective, emphasizing the presence of spontaneous plants as the city's de facto natives, positioning them as "wasteland flora" and suggesting a deeper understanding of their ecological services in the urban fabric.

These artistic and field-based research practices highlight wild plants' contributions to the urban ecosystem, appreciate the wildness hosted by urban cracks, and raise awareness of an inclusive understanding of urban life. The shift in perspective towards an appreciation of the subversive potential of junk ecologies could influence policy changes at local and global levels. As a result of the awareness raised by the *More Than Weeds* project, the use of glyphosate was banned in France in 2017, and some parts of the UK are now pesticide-free. Such efforts lead to an important question: What happens when these weeds are left to grow freely? How might these urban "weeds" sprout in these cracks and continue to challenge public perception?

## Taking Roots

As one explores nature's foresight by interpreting the cracks where junk ecologies coexist within urban life, these spaces invite us to a re-evaluation of how we perceive wild plants in the urban landscape. This re-evaluation requires challenging the traditional notions of the beauty of "ornamental and artificially manicured plants" (Wang et al., 2019) that is hegemonic in contemporary urban space, overshadowing the value of biodiversity and alienating our relationship with nature.

The sympoietic systems characteristic of junk ecologies are temporally dependent, creating rhythm through seasonal transformations. Junk ecologies expand organically through mechanisms such as wind, water flux, and host environments. In the Aegean region of Türkiye, for instance, spring brings edible flowers such as *Malva sylvestris*, *Foeniculum vulgare*, *Raphanus raphanistrum* L., wild mushrooms, and even fig trees, many of which take root in urban cracks.<sup>4</sup> These wild edibles become a part of circular culinary practices and contribute to cultural sustainability. This is evident in ethical foraging practices, where local communities learn how to harvest responsibly while conserving local knowledge.<sup>5</sup> While this suggestion may initially recall the awareness campaigns through learning of wild species in projects like *Spontaneous Urban Plants* and *More Than Weeds*, what truly matters is moving beyond mere recognition of species toward engaging in collaborations with them. A sympoietic approach to junk ecologies can have the potential to promote climate resilience through

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<sup>3</sup> It is inspired by *Sauvages de ma rue*, translated as *Wild Plants of my street*, a project that was developed in 2001. For further information, see <https://www.vigienature.fr/fr/flore/sauvages-de-ma-rue>

<sup>4</sup> A visual diary of Izmir's junk ecologies project can be accessed from this link: Crack Institute

<sup>5</sup> As an instance, Maquis projects (<http://www.maquisprojects.com/>), a local initiative based in Izmir organized a public foraging walk upon an open call, gathering wild herbs from the neighborhood to prepare soups, börek, omelets, pesto, and teas.

improved air quality and enhanced soil health, improving not only human well-being but also that of the planet more generally.

While embracing the vitality of junk ecologies within urban cracks, we not only challenge the sanitized narratives of city life but also recognize the resilience and adaptability of nature. The excessive vitality of weeds – taking roots in abandoned corners and pavement cracks – reminds us that liveliness often thrives in the most unexpected and overlooked spaces, constantly re-shaped by a dynamic interplay between human-made environments and the wildness that persists despite attempts of control and authority. Junk ecologies are not merely leftovers of neglect, but vital components of a complex and multilayered urban narrative concerning humans and non-humans, one that emphasizes coexistence and resilience in the face of modernity's constraints.

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