

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Baby It's "Nature" Outside Nature Beyond Governance and Governance Beyond Nature

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Nadina Galle. 2024. *The Nature of Our Cities: Harnessing the Power of the Natural World to Survive a Changing Planet*. New York and Boston: Mariner Press.



When I was asked to write this book review essay, many ideas came to mind. However, I have a soft spot for talking about the everyday benefits of nature, trees, and urban green areas in cities, so here we are. In 2011, The Better Halves released the song "Baby It's Hot Outside", sparking a new era for climate activism especially for those working on extreme heat, health effects, and mortality rates in relation to cities and the urban heat phenomena. Inspired by this song, I decided to explore Galle's book, *The Nature of Our Cities*, from three different perspectives. First, from a nature perspective; second, from a governance perspective; and third, from a reader perspective. Here, I engage with critical questions about the concept of nature provided throughout the Galle book, including "What definition of nature?", "Which nature is worth protecting?", "Where do we find nature around us?", and "Nature for whom?"

Nature Beyond Governance

In the current debate on nature's values in our lives, several authors have expressed their concerns about how we deal with urban biodiversity in public spaces and with our right to natural spaces as a human species (Foltyn et al. 2023; von Essen et al. 2024). Even more authors debate how to design cities to accommodate natural values in grounding our socio-ecological studies (Cohen 2019; Pineda-Pinto et al. 2024) and socio-cultural perspectives towards finding new and alternative modes





for governance and citizenship on these values (Parra and Walsh 2016). Ian L. McHarg (1969) paved the way for urban planners and designers to use nature as a process, abiding by laws and interactions with the environment as demanded. Since Frank Santamour (1990), the 10-20-30² rule has been the rolling rule of thumb for several cities trying to increase their green and blue infrastructure in urban areas. Later on, Cecil C. Konijnendijk (2023) introduced a 3-30-300³ rule for urban forestry which aims to provide equitable access to green spaces and their benefits for healthier and more resilient neighborhoods. However, the rise of “use” of nature as an element in urban planning and design has evolved in the last few decades with the increasing consequences of the climate crisis: extreme weather events, disruptions to ecosystems, increased heat, floods and flash floods, and the loss of ecosystem services (Olivera-Méndez and Bravo-Vinaja 2025).

The concept of “designing” nature in cities has not stopped evolving. Rather nature has become a central component of urban design (Visintin et al. 2025) with a specific emphasis on the value of nature in and of itself, for instance, with the growing use of “nature” as an aspect in nature-based solutions (Lemes de Oliveira 2025), or nature as non-human elements of landscape (Kujala et al. 2018). Others have looked at nature as a driver for multispecies justice (Celermajer et al. 2021; Raymond et al. 2025); nature as a biodiversity-positive design element (Rizzi 2023); nature for the people (Wolff et al. 2025); or nature as part of the augmented reality environment (Mahmoud et al. 2024). The development of the use of nature in multiscale and integrated nature–people scenarios has progressed lately through the Nature Futures Framework (NFF) (Pereira et al. 2020) and the Adaptive Multifutures Framework (Mahajan 2025), whereas the multispecies and more-than-human agencies seek justice through capacity building (Pineda-Pinto et al. 2025). For instance, the research by Katinka Wijsman et al. (2025) discusses the taken-for-grantedness of the idea that urban green spaces enhance human well-being, which may potentially mask diverse conflicting views on multispecies justice and their trade-offs. Another implication is that researchers such as Alejandra Olivera-Méndez and Ángel Bravo-Vinaja (2025) look to analyze local communities and their relationships with nature from a psychological perspective through connectedness to nature and its impact on well-being, health, emotions, behaviors, cognition, and attention spans.

Governance Beyond Nature

Indeed, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD 2022) puts pressure on several countries and organizations to set out a new



agenda and road map for action on biodiversity protection (von Essen et al. 2024), especially when several variables (waste, food, urban greenery, etc.) related to urban spatial scales are overlapping (Lumbierres et al. 2025). The latest withdrawal of the United States from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) process, halting participation of US scientists in IPCC activities and withdrawing from a key climate assessment meeting (Haskett 2025), has clearly set a pathway for how a big political power can impact climate sustainability and urban nature in general. This action follows a broader trend of the US disengaging from international climate collaboration under the current *Trumpian* administration; however, it is clear that the governance of nature also goes beyond the nature of politics and single country powers (Diep and McPhearson 2025).

The approach to governing nature (*as a design element of the built environment*) has a multilateral connection with cities as a promising strategy to make urban areas more biodiverse and livable in the 21st century, as in the Global Biodiversity Framework target 14⁴. This positivistic vision of nature as a *service for the people* instead of *by the people* is dominating the scientific debate as if nature has a voice and can compute actions in the domain of urban planning (Wolff et al. 2025). It is clearly correlated with the concept of transformative governance of biodiversity as part of a more general framework on nature as an instrument for urban transition (Bulkeley et al. 2022; Smallwood et al. 2022). Klara Johanna Winkler et al. (2021) define four different types of governance related to our ecosystems and natural environments: 1) scientific-technical governance, 2) adaptive and collaborative governance, 3) governing as strategic behavior, and 4) hierarchical governance. These four governance models do largely summarize several attempts to use nature as an element of policy-making, which is currently at the forefront of the debate on how to make more biodiversity-inclusive cities (European Commission 2023; Mahmoud et al. 2025). While considerations of the *governance of nature* have surfaced as a must for ensuring an equitable approach to justice in environmental policies, few authors have gone on to debate the challenge of *integrative* governance, as trade-offs often happen at the local level because of changes in a community's priorities (Bradley et al. 2022; Lazzarini et al. 2024).

Nature as a Reader

The Nature of Our Cities: Harnessing the Power of the Natural World to Survive a Changing Planet, by Nadina Galle (2024), discusses the interconnections between human and nonhuman powers in governance

of environmental challenges. Galle embraces an unfortunately common cry: the climate crisis is worse than we thought, but we can have a better future, maybe?

The book begins with an imaginary Prologue where Galle exposes the reader to a worst case scenario in which rising temperatures have exposed existing cities to catastrophic recurrent floods to the degree that emergency counseling is needed for the victims. In Galle's scenario, natural areas are not spared from the climate crisis, and they are also increasingly lost to weather events. In Chapter 1, "Unsilenced Spring," Galle introduces the novel concept of the Internet of Nature (IoN), building on her experimental ideas of placing sensors on all the trees of Maastricht during her PhD studies. In an attempt to find harmony between nature and technology, she delves into a journey to build sustainable and healthy habitats that is not about "going back to nature" but about moving forward into nature.

In Chapter 2, "Saving Trees on the Paper Trail," she reflects on her childhood memories in Canada and how trees formed part of her daily journey back and forth to school. While Galle explains very well how trees can have a calming effect on us people, she also acknowledges how trees and forests have played an essential role in our existence as pillars of nature. She interrogates how tree inventories (e.g., size, age, location, number, species, and health) are compiled; which is fundamentally needed for maintenance, charting biodiversity, and estimating ecosystem services from nature around us. Galle then explores several models for trees by tracing trees in New York City (NYC) through counting and management (e.g., STRATUM, Treescount!), initiatives (e.g., MillionTreesNYC and Treetracker, Amsterdam), and technologies (e.g., i-Tree tracking, GIS, LiDAR mapping, and PlanIT Geo™).

In Chapter 3, "Throwing Shade on Extreme Heat," Galle oscillates between the heat and its role in acting as the ignition source for relentless wildfires in Greece in 2018, the UK in 2022, and lately France in 2025. She discusses Portland Climate Adaptation Planning + Strategies (CAPA) with Vivek Shandas, Professor of Climate Adaptation at Portland State University, who works with children's immersive education in nature. While reflecting on heat-death and "heat dome" experience from Portland, Galle and Shandas tour different neighborhoods exploring the "extreme contrast" in temperature data recorded in 2021. This tour "shades" the light on how possibly working on "needing greenery" at street level in each neighborhood—which is based on its vulnerability to heat—at the small scale is fundamental rather than only prioritizing buildings and large infrastructure. Shandas has initiated the *Heat*



Watch, placing sensors on people and bikes to collect data at street level, then creating maps to convince officials—with those tools at their fingertips—on where to invest on cooling with greenery. To illustrate this, Galle recalls her maple trees and soil sensing Bostonian experience working with Fabio Duarte from MIT at the Senseable City Lab.

In Chapter 4, “Spreading Like Wildfire,” Galle walks with Zeke Lunder, a fire analyst expert she meets in California, culminating with travel to Oregon. She highlights the challenges of early detection of wildfires using tech-predicting apps. In this chapter, Galle observes how climate change and lack of vegetation management can be problematic for wildfires. Early AI-driven detection and interventions may help reduce such risk of wildfires. Here, she tells stories of Gus Boston and the California Conservation Corps (CCC’s) program as well as Anukool Lakhina and his wife, Shefali, the founders of Wonder Labs, a 2017 philanthropic organization pioneering real-time data processing and analytics for investigating wildfires mitigation and how living with these hazards informed the birth of “BurnBot” using AI breakthroughs in combination with satellite imagery.

Chapter 5, “Draining the Swamp in Real Time,” underscores how nature-based solutions can mitigate flood risks, as floods “disproportionately” negatively impact populations residing in urban areas with their impervious surfaces, such as concrete and asphalt. Galle tells the story of Corry and Jean, a Belgian couple who miraculously survived the July 2021 floods that inundated the Walloon region and some parts of Germany. Next, she meets Davide Leopold, the director of city solutions at Chicago-based City Tech Collaborative, who pioneered investing in green infrastructure to mitigate the damage of stormwater runoff. Bioswales, rain gardens, green roofs, permeable pavements, and bioretention cells were at the forefront of tailored-based solutions to wastewater collection with a team of computer scientists systematically combining data from ground water monitoring and weather conditions to manage potentially disastrous intensive rainfall events.

In Chapter 6, “The Scientists Within Us,” Galle introduces the long-awaited topic, biodiversity loss in urban areas, at last. She tours Leiden accompanied by Menno Schilthuizen, an evolutionary biologist who introduces her to the urban evolution science of garden snails through *SnailSnap*, a community initiative project through iNaturalist. She focuses on how learning from nature using citizen science can help develop more conscious biodiversity data to adapt cities to heat island phenomena, informed by wildlife diversity and stable ecosystems through place-based flora and fauna. With Vincent Kalkman, an eminent



entomologist and Naturalis Biodiversity Center scientist, she discusses the potential use of artificial intelligence in helping citizen scientists to acknowledge mapping broader patterns of biodiversity in cities, using DIOPSIS, an insect camera that uses image recognition technology for flying bugs with over 90 percent accuracy in identifying and providing useful descriptions of animal and plant behaviors post-identification. Back to the IoN, Galle echoes Schilthuizen on raising awareness about democratizing and disseminating biodiversity knowledge to younger generations by informing residents on how to make better environmental and nature protective decisions.

Chapter 7, “Immersion Therapy,” comes as a wake-up call for “nature doses” or what Galle calls *Ecotherapy*. Ecotherapy, with its roots in Japan, comes from the philosophy that nature is a therapeutic force. When we immerse ourselves in outdoor activities in nature, we can heal and grow our nature–human relationship. She recalls her own personal journey from Boston to her childhood home in southwestern Ontario, Canada, which she took overland as a consequence of COVID-19 and the travel bans. This marked her way to what she calls “nature was all I had left,” where she rediscovers taking microbreaks in green spaces near her Ontario family house. Galle “listens and talks with” trees, on the experimental process of “Giants of the North” as a showcase offering a bridge to the right nature-driven technologies. Galle is fascinated by the text-a-tree campaign initiated by Yvonne Lynch, as a reminder for fostering healing possibility through human–nature relationships, albeit the attempt still unpolished.

Chapter 8, “Into the Great Nearby,” builds on how nature is the best physician to increase life expectancy if supported by green urban design. Galle discusses the lack of outdoor spaces, calling for more under the premise that we can benefit from outdoor physical activity that can lower stress and cortisol levels. This is particularly influenced by our built environment design and the relationship of physical health with city planning in general. Here, Galle talks with Jared Hanley about NatureQuant technology, a quantitative app with a mandate to quantify our exposure to the natural environment; the founder of the platform has matured his experience of how nature was his reset button. In a workshop at Politecnico di Milano (PoliMi) in 2023, Galle introduced NatureQuant and the idea left me fascinated. I have had the website open on my tabs for more than two years now, and I still show it to my students on the Master’s in Architecture and urban design program at PoliMi. It all made sense to Galle, since her doubts and questions about how imperative nature is for human longevity came to a full circle.



In Chapter 9, “Raising Future Naturalists,” Galle is filled with hope about children’s curiosity about nature, emphasizing how technology can help reconnect children with nature’s value without having to reduce its instrumental value. In that last stretch, Galle delves into how her reflections on pregnancy had given her a wider perspective on emotional and societal approaches to the natural world for future generations. On her last walk with Richard Louv, a thinker, novelist, and advocate for children and nature interconnections, she presents the Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD), the alarming idea that technology can be a barrier to the relationship between nature and mental health, rather than being an enabler through which we can enhance our understanding and curiosity about the natural world. Focusing on the ultimate goal which is how we can utilize technology to get people outside, enriching the human experience, Galle focuses on how we can use apps like iNaturalist to recognize species, and gamify biodiversity through time spent outdoors.

Galle concludes her book with a futuristic vision of *Oakly, the talking Oak*, which has sensors attached to it and is programmed to translate data into perceptual images for social media. Oakly is a manifestation of how IoN sensors can connect the system where trees, soil, and water talk to each other and optimize our relationships with the natural world.

Galle offers firm and clear insights into technological intersections with nature based on her field work and a *lot* of conversations and storytelling on the go in NYC, Maastricht, Boston, Portland, Leiden, and southern California, among other places. Galle’s writing is garnished with quotes from famous architects and poets. She indulges us with little details of how she cares for her elderly neighbor, Mrs. Temple, making her book a vivid reading for fairy tales about a future naturalistic utopia, something that is missing nowadays. Within all the stories, her key message is clear—work on nature at every possible scale, partner with technologies, put sensors on trees and soil, embed AI in your data readings, and above all, engage in conversations with others (i.e., researchers, scientists, children, and elderly people). Boosted with positivism, Galle, however, does not venture into systems-thinking on environmental policy governance, the complexity of cities’ current economic and land-management systems, and deeper community-engagement issues, such as lack of commitment in implementing nature-based interventions. Galle, even though departing from a dystopian view of a city without nature, co-produces a futuristic vision of technology in which cities are thriving, with nature at the center of life. While I understand

the key messages of urban living as experimental platform for how technology can amplify the human–nature relationship, I find myself missing an actionable plan on where to walk a new path in nature studies if not through technological approaches. Nonetheless, this is an excellent book that I will be rereading and recommending to my students and other scholars of nature as a good summer reader.



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Notes

1. The song inspired Kimberley Claire O’Sullivan and Elinor Chisholm (2020) in the perspective “Baby it’s hot outside,” in *Energy Research & Social Science*, see references list.

2. Frank Santamour’s 10-20-30 rule, published around 1990, suggests a guideline for species diversity in urban forests to prevent catastrophic loss from pests or diseases. The Benchmark: no more than 10% of a single species, no more than 20% of a single genus, and no more than 30% of a single family in a municipal tree planting program.

3. The 3-30-300 rule, developed by Cecil Konijnendijk, is an urban greening guideline aiming to improve health and climate resilience. It states that citizens should see at least three trees from their home, live in a neighborhood with 30% tree canopy cover, and be within 300 meters of a quality green space.

4. <https://www.cbd.int/gbif/targets/14>

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