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Conceptualizing the Open City: What Is “Open”, in What Ways, and Why

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Abstract This chapter aims to construct a conceptual map of the open city that can serve as a guide in navigating its many ambiguities and the different sources of its value. First, adopting a critical reconstructive approach to the literature, it identifies five different senses of openness as applied to the city: transparency, involvement, inclusivity, flexibility, and porosity. Second, adopting a formal conceptual approach, it combines these different senses of openness with three possible subjects of openness—the city as a set of institutions, as a set of individuals, and as a physical environment. It then shows what these different senses of openness, with their different possible subjects and objects, have in common

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at a more abstract level of analysis. Finally, adopting a normative approach, it shows how and why the various instances of the open city are and should be considered valuable, tracing their ultimate justifications to the two foundational values of democracy and freedom.

Keywords Open city • Liberty • Democracy • Adaptability • Transparency

Three Approaches to the “Open City”: Critical-Reconstructive, Formal-Conceptual and Normative

The theme of the “open city” features with increasing prominence both in academic discourse and in public debate. However, discussions about the nature and justification of the “open city” are often in need of further clarification, partly because the very concept of “openness” has remained under-analysed and partly because different uses of the concept refer to different features of the city. Some authors have indeed spoken, understandably enough, of an “elusive concept with a panoply of context-bound interpretations” (Abou Jaoude et al., 2024, p. 721). In short, the open city still lacks a “commonly agreed-upon definition” (Bråten, 2025, p. 823).¹

There are indeed several distinct interpretations of what it means for a city to be “open”. In this chapter, we first seek to clarify and analyse these different interpretations, starting from the existing literature and adopting a *critical-reconstructive* approach. We then take the analysis to a higher level of abstraction, adopting a *formal conceptual* approach that helps in clarifying what the different interpretations have in common. Finally, we adopt a *normative* approach, grouping the different interpretations into two main categories on the basis of two distinct underlying values.

¹ See also Ipsen (2005, p. 645): “The conditions required for an open city lead into a contradictory field of ideas, perceptions and evaluations”.

A Critical-Reconstructive Approach: Five Distinct Senses of “Openness” in the Literature on the Open City

We begin by identifying five distinct senses in which the term “openness” has been used in references to the “open city”. They are: (i) openness as *transparency* of certain public procedures and data; (ii) openness as *involvement*, in the sense of welcoming citizens’ participation in urban decision-making; (iii) openness as *inclusivity*, in the sense of accommodating social diversity; (iv) openness as *flexibility* in the practices of urban transformation; (v) openness as *porosity* of the urban physical structure.

These are not the only senses in which the notion of openness might be, or indeed has been, invoked with reference to the “open city”. They are, however, the most recurrent and frequently emphasized (either individually or in various combinations, albeit not always systematically) by the various authors who have focused on the topic in a sustained way. Let us briefly consider each of them in turn.

(i) A first sense of openness is, then, *transparency*, where this is understood as implying the accessibility of public documents and data. As Abou Jaoude et al. (2024, p. 722) note, the idea of the open city “is gaining momentum in urban planning and architecture with the growing discourse on open data, digital citizenship, and data sovereignty”. In this context, the main concern is the possibility of accessing certain kinds of information. As already implied, two main categories of information are relevant in this context. First, there is the traditional issue of access to public records related to official acts and decisions. These include documents generated through local decision-making and administrative procedures, such as permits, council meeting minutes, or regulatory approvals. It is held to be essential that these records be traceable and easily accessible so that the public can verify how decisions were made and hold authorities accountable.² Second, there is the new and challenging issue of access to data contained in public databases that may cover a wider range of information beyond more traditional official acts

²The point is not merely to have *retrospective* access to public documents, but to have the opportunity to understand the plans, policies, and rules of the game as they unfold in real time.

(Stephenson et al., 2012; Bicknese & van der Oord, 2015; Jaakola et al., 2015; Mainka et al., 2015; Quartucci et al., 2017; Zuiderwijk et al., 2018; Degbelo et al., 2019; Jussila et al., 2019; Praharaj & Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Fang et al., 2023). These databases might include statistics, research data, environmental monitoring results, or other datasets collected and maintained by public bodies. It is held to be important to guarantee all members of the public access to such data without undue barriers, so as to allow individuals, organizations, and researchers to freely consult and utilize this information for various purposes, including analysis, innovation, or advocacy. Unlike certain “smart city” approaches, often dominated by corporate and top-down control (see, e.g., Hollands, 2015; Sadowski & Bendor, 2019; Voorwinden, 2021), the open city frames technology as a tool for accountability towards citizens and, more generally, for their empowerment. Transparency fosters trust in governance. Examples here are platforms that allow residents to monitor air quality, traffic flows, or public budgets in real time.

(ii) A second sense of openness is *involvement*. Here, openness implies that citizens have a real voice in public matters and in decisions concerning the city. The granting of this voice encourages citizens’ participation, understood as active engagement in collective decisions and co-production of the urban environment. We use the term “involvement” to indicate an *openness to* participation, hence a disposition that renders it possible or likely. The participation in question can take various forms, including participatory budgeting and planning, neighbourhood councils, and citizen assemblies and forums. People attach value to the encouragement of active engagement because they perceive it as ensuring that urban policy and planning reflect lived experiences, not just expert opinion, making governance more responsive and locally grounded. See, for instance, Ciura (2021, p. 219): “The open city can be implemented through a participatory approach between the municipality, designers and citizens in a coherent manner”. According to some, it is cities—“open cities”—rather than nation-states that can give rise to more direct and radical forms of democratic participation (Magnusson, 2022).

(iii) A third sense of openness is *inclusivity*. This means that an open city is inherently pluralistic; it embraces difference rather than homogenizing it. The pluralism in question is typically taken to include gender,

age, lifestyle, ethnicity, culture, and religion. See, for instance, John Friedmann (2002, p. 232): an open city is “a city that is life affirming, that reaches out to others who are not necessarily like us, and that acknowledges our common humanity and the pleasures of a life lived among multipli/cities”. In other words, the open city “is an inclusive vision in which local citizenship is extended to all residents on a basis of equality” (Friedmann, 2002, p. 240). Consider also Pile et al. (2023, p. 5): “The open city is ethical by being open to others in everyday encounters”. In this sense, “the open city, in becoming a place that is home to the stranger, embraces the unknown, not only welcoming difference but also suggesting that it is ordinary” (Becker, 2023, p. 35). Clearly, these descriptions entail openness in the sense of being welcoming to city users, new residents, and immigrants. With reference especially to the latter case, Saskia Sassen (2015, p. 302) writes: “The particular case of immigrant integration in Europe over the centuries is one window into this complex and historically variable question of the making of the European Open City. In my reading, over and over again across time and space, the challenges of incorporating the ‘outsider’ became the instruments for developing the civic in the best sense of the word”.

(iv) A fourth sense of openness is *flexibility* (sometimes also referred to as “adaptability”). Openness as flexibility refers to the idea that the city is not constrained by a rigid comprehensive plan and strictly prescriptive zoning regulations, but rather allows citizens significant latitude in the use and transformation of their spaces and buildings. See for example Steadman and Millington (2025, p. 4): “The open city is flexible and adaptable, empowering users to reconfigure space according to multiple needs and desires, contrasting with a singular, top-down or predetermined design” (compare with Porqueddu, 2018, 2025). This may include, for example, the possibility of freely changing the function of a building, or parts thereof. Whilst traditional land-use plans generally specify strictly separate functions, an open city relaxes this rigidity by allowing overlapping uses and changing functions over time. In the same direction, the open city may allow owners or inhabitants to freely modify the interior of apartments, offices, or commercial premises, provided that such alterations do not entail structural modifications. In short, rather than imposing rigid, predetermined solutions (e.g., a single housing type or street

pattern), the open city allows a diversity of building types, lot sizes, and street uses, so that its various parts can evolve as circumstances change. Further examples may include the freedom to employ new construction technologies and innovative technical solutions for producing and sharing renewable energy, or to imagine new forms of co-living and co-working within buildings.

(v) A fifth sense of openness is *porosity*. Porosity implies physical openness, that is, a certain degree of accessibility and interconnectedness of urban space. Porosity facilitates movement, encounters, and interactions across different parts of the city. It can be realized, for example, through the creation of extensive walkable streets (where a dense, interconnected grid enables residents to traverse the city efficiently, encourages spontaneous encounters, and prevents “dead ends” that isolate neighbourhoods); readily accessible public squares (gathering points that attract people from various areas and promote social mixing); permeable block layouts (structures that are neither monolithic nor inward-facing but offer entry points, passageways, and semi-public spaces conducive to interaction); and soft boundaries that avoid strongly exclusionary barriers (eschewing high, solid, non-transparent walls, fences, or gates in favour of thresholds that are primarily symbolic or functional, without obstructing visibility). In short, porosity is about breaking down physical barriers as much as possible so that the city’s life can be fluid and dynamic. Porosity makes the city physically navigable. This aspect is underscored especially by Sendra and Sennett (2022, pp. 23–35).

Transparency, involvement, inclusivity, flexibility, and porosity can all be understood as characteristics consisting in *dispositions*. A disposition is a tendency of something to behave in a given way in a given kind of situation. Thus, transparency, in the present context, is a tendency to allow access to documents and data on the part of those seeking it; and porosity, in the present context, is a tendency to allow for easy access to different parts of the city on the part of those seeking it. Virtues are examples of dispositions, and the above five dispositions are indeed mostly assumed, in the literature, to be virtues of a city. Hence the approbative nature of the concept of an open city. The concept is not *essentially* evaluative, but

it is nevertheless generally used with *positive evaluative connotations* (Carter, 2015, p. 284).³

A Formal Conceptual Approach: Modelling the Open City as a Triadic Relation

On the basis of the five openness dispositions, let us now try to conceptualize the open city at a higher level of abstraction. To begin with, we should note that each disposition must have a subject and an object.

The Subject and Object of Openness

For each of the above dispositions, there is something that possesses it. In the literature on the open city, the thing that is open is of course assumed to be *a city*. In other words, the city is assumed to be the grammatical *subject* of the relevant disposition of openness. On closer inspection, however, we see that the exact nature of the subject can change as we move from speaking of one disposition to speaking of another. For whenever we speak of “a city”, we might be referring to one of three things:

- (a) *A set of institutions*, in particular those constituting the local public authorities with jurisdiction over a given physical territory. For example, “the city of Berlin recently approved some major new cycle paths”.
- (b) *A set of citizens* understood as residents and city users. For example: “the city of Dublin is particularly lively on a Saturday night”.

³The reader may notice how the five distinct senses of “openness” are explored in at least the following places in this book. Chap. 5 discusses openness as “transparency”, particularly in relation to the role of stakeholders’ and citizens’ involvement in fostering piecemeal experimentation and learning in public governance. Chap. 4 presents “inclusivity” as the experience of a pluralistic urban environment, framing it as one of the two main narratives of the open city. At the same time, Chap. 8 warns against the risks of a simplistic or romanticised approach to this concept. Openness as “flexibility” and openness as “adaptability” are recurrently addressed throughout the book, especially in Chaps. 6 and 7. Finally, openness as “porosity” is examined in Chap. 3 in relation to the micro-scale of openness, in Chap. 4 as a key experiential driver of the open city, and in Chap. 6 as a crucial design element.

- (c) *A physical environment* consisting in a set of artefacts including buildings and infrastructures. For example, “the city of Venice is a labyrinth of canals and narrow alleys”.

Institutions, citizens, and the physical environment are three distinct *elements* of a city.⁴ Leaving aside the case of an anarchic city,⁵ in which element (a) is absent, each can be plausibly considered a *necessary* feature of a city, or at least of a “living” city. As a result, it makes no sense to suggest that a city can consist in only one of them. Nevertheless, when referring to “the open city”, authors often imply that only one, or perhaps two, of the three elements—(a) to (c)—is the subject that possesses the relevant disposition—(i) to (v). For example, in the case of *transparency*, the subject is clearly a set of institutions, whereas in the case of porosity the subject is clearly a physical environment. Sometimes the subject is ambiguous until further clarified. For example, inclusivity might be understood as either a “vertical” disposition of a local authority or a “horizontal” disposition of individual citizens, or both.

Finally, to provide a complete account of the open city, we need to say what the subject is open *to*. In other words, the disposition must have not only a grammatical *subject* but also a grammatical *object*. For example, in the case of involvement, the object might be the direct participation of citizens in planning decisions (the city as a set of institutions is open *to* such participation), or the creation and encouragement of citizen forums (the city as a set of institutions is open *to* input from such forums), or both of these. In the case of flexibility, the object may concern, for instance, changes in land use or building function, modifications to the internal configuration of buildings, the use of new construction technologies, or the implementation of innovative co-living or co-working arrangements (the city as a set of institutions is open *to* one or more of such transformations). And so on. Once again, then, the concept of the open city might remain relevantly ambiguous—in this case, until its *object* is clearly specified.

⁴ The relevance of institutions is discussed frequently throughout this book, particularly in Chaps. 3, 4, 7, and 8. Chaps. 3 and 4 also focus on citizens and culture, while, among others, Chaps. 5, 6, and 7 address the physical dimension of openness.

⁵ On which, see, e.g., Rothbard (1973/2002, pp. 249 ff).

There are of course only a limited number of ways of combining the subjects, dispositions, and objects. For example, accessing databases is a possible object of transparency, but not of the other four dispositions. We do not propose to go into detail regarding the range of possible objects of each of the dispositions, but it is worth pausing to clarify the nature of the possible subjects. *Inclusivity* and *flexibility* can have as their subject *either* a set of institutions *or* a set of citizens, *or both*. As we have seen, the same inclusive disposition can be a feature of a local authority (implying “vertical” toleration) and/or of citizens (implying “horizontal” toleration). Similarly, flexibility can be a feature of the planning rules enacted by a local authority (showing openness to changes in forms, uses, and functions of buildings and their surroundings) and/or of the owners and users who take advantage of those rules in such a way as to favour adaptability (Carter & Moroni, 2022). In the case of *transparency*, *involvement*, and *porosity*, by contrast, the openness disposition has only one possible subject: institutions, in the case of transparency and involvement; the physical environment, in the case of porosity.⁶

We can now see more clearly why the concept of the open city has sometimes been seen as “elusive” or even confused. There are indeed multiple ways in which its meaning can vary, as we have identified three variables (a subject, its disposition, and the object of the disposition), and for each of these variables the extension might be unclear. But we can also see how a clearer understanding of the three variables, and of the ways in which they can be combined, can help to clarify how the concept is being used in given contexts, leading not to its abandonment as too vague or ambiguous but to more incisive and fruitful theorizing about its complex nature and value.

⁶ That said, the *value* of the relevant institutional or physical disposition nevertheless depends on a *corresponding disposition* on the part of *citizens*. This corresponding disposition of citizens is not itself plausibly characterized as one of “openness”, but is a disposition to act in various ways in response to the openness of the institutions or the physical environment, such that the institutional or physical openness results in something valuable and counts, in turn, as derivatively valuable. In the case of transparency, the corresponding disposition of citizens is to become more informed about public decisions and the data collected by local authorities; in the case of involvement, the corresponding disposition of citizens is to engage actively in public deliberation and decision making; in the case of porosity, the corresponding disposition of citizens is to move and explore the city.

A Triadic Formula

We are now in a position to identify a single, formal “concept” of the open city, as opposed to the various specific instances of the open city identified so far. The formal concept of the open city can be defined as a triadic relation between a particular subject that is open in a particular way to a given object. More precisely:

A subject or subjects, X, possess one or more openness dispositions, Y, towards an object or objects, Z

where X is one or more of the three elements of a city, Y is one or more of the five dispositions, and Z is one or more of a set of processes or outcomes.⁷

A *particular instance* of the open city involves the concrete realization of the triad (X, Y, Z) under a particular specification of each of the three variables. For example, one particular instance of the open city is the fact of a set of institutions (X) showing the disposition of transparency (Y) in the sense of allowing citizens’ access to a specific kind of public database (Z). Another particular instance is the fact of a set of citizens (X) showing the disposition of inclusivity (Y) in the sense of “horizontally” tolerating (or perhaps even valuing) a variety of places of worship for people of different religions (Z). Yet another is the fact of a physical environment (X) possessing the disposition of porosity (Y) in the sense of allowing citizens to meet and interact in specific ways (Z). When people assume different specifications of the three variables in their claims about the nature or value of the open city, there is a sense in which they are really talking about *different things*. The point of the more abstract formal *concept* of the open city is to show how there is nevertheless another sense in which they are all talking about *the same thing* (Carter, 2015, pp. 298–303).

Discourse and theorizing about the open city assumes, at least implicitly, a variety of *definitions* of the open city. A *definition* of the open city

⁷This formal concept is inspired by MacCallum Jr’s (1967) analysis of freedom. According to MacCallum, there is a single concept that covers all apparently divergent uses of the term “freedom”: an agent, X, is free from preventing conditions, Y, to realize some action or condition, Z.

covers a *particular set of possible instances* of the kind outlined above. In other words, to define the open city is to fix the limits of the *possible extension* of each of the three variables.⁸ Different definitions of the open city can be understood as providing different interpretations of the formal concept (some might say, as providing different “conceptions” of that concept⁹). However, there is a danger of such differences turning out to be merely terminological. We therefore propose adopting a *maximally capacious* definition of the open city—that is, one that covers all of the possible instances falling under the formal concept.

As well as providing a *definition* of the open city, we might attempt to construct a *theory* of the open city. To construct a theory of the open city is to combine the descriptive analysis provided so far with, among other things, a normative analysis that explains and justifies our interest in the concept. In other words, it is to say what, if anything, is ethically desirable about the various possible instances of the open city, and why. In the next section, we take some first steps in that direction.

A Normative Approach: Two Underlying Values

In the previous section we noted that a *theory* of the open city must also have a *normative* dimension. Let us then adopt a normative approach, and ask how and why the various instances of the open city can be considered valuable. To do so, it will be helpful to focus primarily on the five openness dispositions (variable Y in the formal concept). The reason for this focus is simple: once the relevant disposition is fixed, the relevant

⁸One can indeed imagine *measuring* (at least in some rough sense) “how open” a particular city is by assuming a particular definition and then asking how many of the possible instances of each variable are in fact realized. For example, if the definition covers all five dispositions, we can ask: Does the city as a set of institutions show only transparency and involvement, or also inclusivity and/or flexibility and/or porosity? And to what extent in each case? In other words, how many of the possible objects (covered by the definition) is the city effectively open to? We can be as fine-grained in the individuation of the relevant objects as the purposes of measurement dictate. For example: How many shades of green is a Tuscan shutter permitted to be painted?

⁹On the distinction between a general concept and its particular “conceptions”, see Rawls (1999, p. 5). We prefer to avoid using this distinction here, as the idea of “different conceptions of the concept” conveys more of a sense of rivalry than seems to be present in the literature on the open city.

grounding value is invariant, regardless of variations in the possible subject or object of the disposition. In particular, focusing on the five dispositions allows us to group the various instances of the open city concept into just two overarching categories, each of which is based on a key political value. The two values are *democracy* and *freedom*.¹⁰

It is fairly clear and elementary that institutional transparency and involvement can be reconceptualized as components of an ideal of *democracy*—a relatively rich ideal that encompasses not only traditional forms of representative democracy (Popper, 1945; Dahl, 1956; Sartori, 1976) but also elements of more participatory and direct (local) democracy (Barber, 1984; Fischer, 2003; Lafont, 2019). Moreover, it has often been noted that citizens’ active engagement in decision making and citizens’ access to public documents and data are two mutually reinforcing features of a democracy (see, in general, Schmidhuber et al., 2021, and, with more specific reference to the open city, Anttiroiko, 2016).

It is less immediately obvious that specifications of the open city concept in terms of inclusivity, flexibility and porosity are all approbative in virtue of their being normatively grounded in the value of *freedom*. Let us therefore examine this idea more closely.

The idea of freedom, like that of democracy, has been interpreted in a variety of ways, but the sense of freedom that interests us here is that of “negative” freedom, or freedom as the absence of external constraints on individuals’ possible courses of action (Berlin, 1969; Carter & Huseynli, 2026). Negative freedom can be either normative or physical. *Normative* negative freedom is the absence of normative prohibitions or normative disabilities, which for citizens implies, respectively, the presence of normative permissions (to carry out a variety of alternative courses of action) and normative powers (such as the power to buy or sell properties, to rent them for a variety of purposes, or to create and join urban associations). Increasing *institutional inclusivity* and *institutional flexibility* implies greater normative freedom for citizens, in this negative sense. *Physical* negative freedom is the absence of the obstacles that would make certain courses of action physically impossible, as opposed to normatively prohibited. An increase in *physical porosity* clearly opens up more options for

¹⁰ On the relevance of freedom and democracy, see also Chaps. 3, 4 and 7.

citizens to move physically and to meet and gather in various ways. Increases in *inclusivity and flexibility on the part of citizens* further ensure a broader range of physical negative freedoms, respectively, for different cultural groups to pursue whatever individual and collective projects they might have (within the limits implied by other groups’ similar freedoms), and for inhabitants to change the uses to which they put spaces and buildings.

From our perspective, negative freedom, both normative and physical, has a kind of value that is especially relevant in the present context: *non-specific* value (Carter, 1999; Kramer, 2003). Freedom is non-specifically valuable if it has value independently of its content as the freedom to do one or another specific thing. Thus, another name for “non-specific” value is “content-independent” value. The non-specific (or content-independent) value of freedom implies *openness* about the content of the valuable outcomes that freedom serves to produce. It is therefore a kind of value that eschews perfectionism and paternalism and instead favours maximizing the space for diversity and creativity. It is sometimes implicitly assumed that freedom is valuable because, and only to the extent that, it allows us to do specific valuable things. This assumption would be true if we already knew which future possible pursuits are valuable; but we do not. Rather, we attach value to freedom, at least in part, precisely because we do not know, or it is not our place to specify, which courses of action are the most valuable for citizens, or are most likely to be valuable in the future.

In our view, the non-specific value of freedom is in great part instrumental, as it serves as a means to ends that are non-specific. In the context of the city some of the strongest arguments in favour of inclusiveness, flexibility and porosity implicitly draw on the idea of freedom as instrumentally valuable in this non-specific way. We know, as a matter of empirical generalization, that inclusiveness, flexibility and porosity all have valuable outcomes, but we are unable to specify the nature of those outcomes before they actually occur. Indeed, if we already knew the exact nature of those valuable outcomes, we could pursue them directly rather than through inclusiveness, flexibility and porosity. Openness would then lose much of its value. But we cannot pursue them directly, because their nature is as yet unknown, given the unpredictability of future

circumstances, of future needs and interests, and of human creativity in finding ways to satisfy them. Consider, in this connection, the discussion by Mattsson and Sørensen (2015, p. 199) on innovations in city renewal: “Theoretically and empirically the concept of open city innovation suggests a new way of perceiving city renewal with its focus on the discovery and development of unpredictable solutions resulting from interactive, iterative and reflexive processes”.

The idea of non-specific instrumental value can be traced back to the empirical premise, affirmed by John Stuart Mill (1859) among others, that individual development and societal progress are both best promoted by according individuals the space to carry out “experiments in living”, to interact in creative and unpredictable ways, to make mistakes and to learn from them. In the context of the city, this premise explains much of what we value in cultural and religious freedom (promoted by institutional and individual inclusivity), in the freedom to make changes to our physical environment (promoted by institutional and individual flexibility), in freedom of movement (promoted by physical porosity), and in freedom of association (promoted by both institutional inclusivity and physical porosity).¹¹

The fundamental normative concepts of democracy and freedom already possess a consolidated pedigree in the history of political thought, and the idea of the “open city” can be plausibly reconstructed as an attempt to bring together these two ideals within a particular physical, social and administrative context (i.e., urban systems), while appropriately placing new emphasis on certain of their aspects within that particular context. However, while the normative ideal of democracy is widely acknowledged within planning theory and urban studies, the normative ideal of freedom has not enjoyed the same attention, and has often been viewed with ideological suspicion.¹² We suggest, by contrast,

¹¹ There is a strong historical association of freedom with the city. In particular, we should not forget the crucial connection between freedom and the renaissance of the city in Europe starting from the eleventh century (Pirenne, 1925). Drawing on the theoretical literature on freedom, this historical association can be reconstructed on the basis either of the negative conception of freedom or on the basis of its rival “republican” conception. See Pettit (1989), Moen (2024).

¹² The confused and confusing debate (Buitelaar, 2020) on so-called neoliberalism in planning theory and urban studies has only compounded this situation.

that a consistent defence of the ideal of the open city *presupposes* a commitment to the non-specific value of freedom. Our analysis of freedom and its value appears, indeed, to align perfectly with the general approach of Jane Jacobs (1961, 1969), the author most often cited as the principal forerunner of the very idea of the open city.¹³

Many have emphasized that the open city cannot but be *incomplete*, *errant* and *unfinished*. This feature of the open city (one might call it a “meta-feature”) can in fact be clearly explained in light of the *combination* of the two underlying ideals considered: democracy and liberty. The existence of *genuine* democracy, understood as a set of procedures involving citizens’ active participation, ensures that public decisions cannot be identified or predicted a priori, as they will be made on an ongoing basis according to the contingent majorities and coalitions that happen to be formed. Similarly, the existence of an ample degree of freedom ensures that the private decisions of individuals and groups cannot be identified or predicted a priori, since individuals and groups will exercise their freedoms as they choose, discovering over time what they value most and generating creativity and innovation (Cozzolino & Moroni, 2024). Taken together, democracy and freedom introduce a form of structured unpredictability in both the public and private spheres: democracy produces *unpredictable public outcomes* due to shifting coalitions and deliberative processes; liberty produces *unpredictable private outcomes* due to individuals’ and groups’ exploration of the myriad alternatives available to them. In both cases—collective decisions and individual explorations—the outcomes are open in the sense of being non-specific. This dual unpredictability is not chaotic but is generative: it allows urban societies to innovate and evolve in response to changing conditions, making them more resilient and dynamic over time. Thus, the connections between openness and democracy, on the one hand, and openness and freedom, on the

¹³ See, e.g., Sendra and Sennett (2022, p. 26); Abou Jaoude et al. (2024, p. 723). Consider, for instance, the following observation by Jacobs (1961, p. 391): “But what we have to express in expressing our cities is not to be scorned. Their intricate order—a manifestation of the freedom of countless numbers of people to make and carry out countless plans—is in many ways a great wonder. We ought not to be reluctant to make this living collection of interdependent uses, this freedom, this life, more understandable for what it is, nor so unaware that we do not know what it is”.

other, help to explain the striking convergence on the *value* of the open city, despite the no less striking variety of instances endorsed.

The two ideals of democracy and freedom are generally compatible, but are not automatically so.¹⁴ Frictions and conflicts may arise, as evidenced in a number of classic contributions to political theory, including those of Benjamin Constant (1819), John Stuart Mill (1861), and Isaiah Berlin (1969). As a final point, then, we should note the possibility of normative tensions *within* the concept of the open city. To cite just one prominent contemporary concern: intolerant populist movements can influence public decisions, thanks to their institutional involvement, in ways that lead to lesser degrees not only of citizens' inclusivity but also of institutional inclusivity (think, for example, of regulatory and bureaucratic barriers to the building of mosques in some western liberal democracies: Chiodelli & Moroni, 2017, 2025). Sometimes, then, trade-offs may need to be made between the democratically motivated and the liberally motivated forms of openness. Such tensions should not come as a surprise, given some well-rehearsed arguments to the effect that liberalism and democracy are in some ways mutually reinforcing but in other ways a source of potential conflicts. Nor, however, should the existence of such potential conflicts be jumped on as a pretext for underplaying the foundational role of one or the other of the two values in the ideal of the open city.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have first sought to analyse the various and most frequently cited ideas of the "open city". Having identified the three variables shared by all such ideas, we have reconstructed a single formal concept of the open city, thereby clarifying both the senses in which theorists of the open city are talking about different things, and the sense in which they are talking about the same thing. Subsequently, we have explored the normative grounding of the various instances of the open city, grouping them as based either on the ideal of democracy (where the

¹⁴ On this point, see also Chap. 7.

relevant openness dispositions are transparency and involvement) or on that of freedom (where the relevant openness dispositions are inclusivity, flexibility and porosity). We have seen that, while the role of freedom in grounding the value of the open city has sometimes been underestimated, for the most part the two values of democracy and freedom play complementary roles, both in explaining the widespread perception of the open city as a permanently unpredictable and incomplete project, and in justifying a normative vision of the open city as dynamic, creative and responsive to citizens’ evolving aspirations and interests.

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