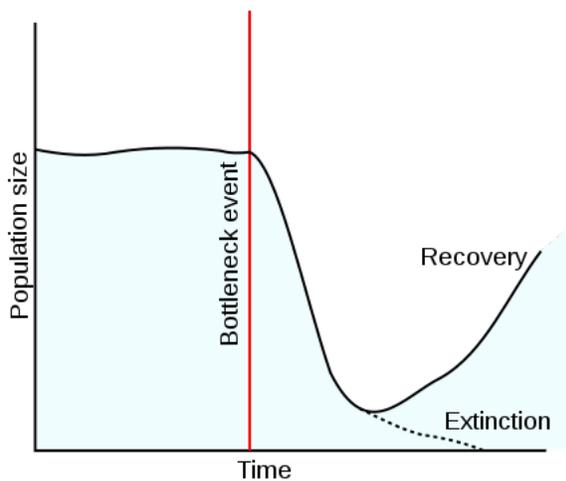




## On Cities and their Evolutionary Purpose as Learning Space

- I. Let's start from a large scale POV: What do you think is currently at stake? What is our calling as city makers, as change makers, as responsible individuals? As societies?

What is at stake? The survival of mankind. Not more or less. If we do not manage to prototype and scale a model for a sane society, we will exterminate ourselves. Does this sound too dark? Population scientists speak of a bottleneck event which leads to a drastic reduction of a population size. I believe that our current concept of cities is directly connected to it. What [John Calhoun](#) labelled as behavioral sink in his famous mouse experiments is a sad reality in much of the world's urban living, where high population densities and low social standards emulate the condition of the scientist's experiments.<sup>i</sup>



[Erich Fromm](#), one of the greatest social psychologists of all time, wrote once a book called *The Sane Society*,<sup>ii</sup> in which he analyses how social systems impact the mental health of the individual. He examines the alienating effects of modern capitalism and offers his view on how to reorganize society.<sup>iii</sup>

What was not so obvious in 1955 has become an undeniable truth: there is a direct correlation between mental and environmental health. Individuals who are unbalanced, frustrated or depressed compensate their unhappiness with more consumption and thus fuel the exploitation and degradation of our planet. Adult well-being, we know now, is mostly a result of early childhood experiences and education.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution we observe an accelerated rise of mental health disease in developed nations. When Sigmund Freud treated Vienna's bourgeoisie elite at the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for its neurotic disorders and its discontent with civilization, the global human population hovered between one and two billion and had little impact on the state of the planet.

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Meanwhile, many populous but developing nations have followed the Western growth paradigm and have succeeded in moving unprecedented numbers of citizens out of poverty and into material affluence. China is only one albeit giant example of a nation which aims to concentrate more than 80% of its total population in cities – for the sake of pushing its GDP through inflated urban real estate markets and the promise of entering modernity.

Despite the economic benefits, a rise in the urban consuming class will exacerbate China's and as such the world's environmental problems. According to a World Bank study, China's urban residents use three times as much energy as rural residents,<sup>iv</sup> and the recent Covid19 crisis has revealed the tragic mental health situation with a surge in child suicides at the visible tip of a growing iceberg of mental disorders.<sup>v</sup>

Change makers are called to look deeply into fast urbanizing regions to assess whether cities in their contemporary setup do promote human and planetary wellbeing. China's economy of scale and its authoritarian governance offer unique insights into the impact of urbanization on planet and people. Solutions to 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges must combine these insights and include China as major stakeholder.



2. If you were to co-create a Citymaker version 2.0 (whatever name that will have) what are the impulses, you would give? What potential do you see?



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Let's start with an analysis of the evolutionary purpose of cities and ask if this purpose has changed over the course of human existence. If we think of the library of Alexandria, the early universities of Renaissance Italy or modern institutions like MIT, Fudan University or ETH Zurich, we quickly understand that, what we consider as world class education, is directly connected to the world's most expensive cities.



### Cities as Educational Spaces

Cities have at least since the European Medieval Ages held the promise of freedom and social mobility for the semi-enclaved rural population. Cities were spaces where knowledge was created in an accelerated manner compared to the countryside. One could thus say that cities had an evolutionary function in bringing the minds of people into a single space to create something new.<sup>vi</sup> They were oversized machines for living which created not only products and services, but above all knowledge.<sup>vii</sup> **Cities were gargantuan educational spaces.**

Urban agglomerations have always played an important role in human evolution by connecting people and thus establishing a space for innovation and creativity.<sup>viii</sup> The spillover effect is just one of many phenomena which can be observed in early urban ecosystems among artists, creatives and young academics. Gentrified cities with high rents and unaffordable real estate price tags stifle social mobility and deprive the ecosystem of its very meaning: to accelerate human interaction and innovation and thus generate genuine progress.



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The exponential technological progress of the last few decades, in particular the birth of the internet, has reduced the importance of cities for the creation of knowledge and acquisition of information. We observe an automated information flood as culture critic [Neil Postman](#) pointed out in his well-known 1990 speech "Informing Ourselves to Death", which strangely inhibits the creation of anything really new.<sup>ix</sup>

Philosophers have long separated the mind's purview into three components: information, knowledge, and wisdom. The Internet focuses on the realm of information, whose spread it facilitates exponentially. Yet a surfeit of information may paradoxically inhibit the acquisition of knowledge and push wisdom even further away than it was before.<sup>x</sup> This risk prevails both in city and countryside, but urban life drives behavioral addictions like obsessive social networking more.<sup>xi</sup>

In some way cities have thus turned into deserts of consumption and indulgence; and many creatives seek again the solitude of the countryside to inspire and be inspired.<sup>xii</sup> Cities have largely lost their evolutionary value and therefore need to be rethought if they shall continue to serve a relevant function in society, that is apart from being spaces which make it easy to control obedient citizens and loyal customers.

Again, I believe that the root cause for this phenomenon is to be found by looking into how we design and use spaces, and which impact they have on our lives and well-being. City life is individualistic, and its pace makes it difficult to unwind and bond. Both space and pace create an alienation from people and planet, but people need to mingle physically in order to truly inspire each other; and they need to be connected with the planet in order to respect and appreciate nature.

My interest in behavioral architecture has led me to the question whether there are periods in human development which are more suitable to city or countryside life. I have ended up to combine for adult life the insights of [Eric Erickson's](#) stages of psychosocial development<sup>xiii</sup> and [Emile Durkheim's](#) vision of renewed social cohesion through action from occupational groups.<sup>xiv</sup> Erickson explained a blueprint for the development of the human psyche. Durkheim foresaw a transformation from communities of kinship towards communities of interest and passion.

Psychoanalyst Erickson provided the rationale for why I believe that cities of the future should be predominantly designed as educational spaces for young adults up till age 35. Sociologist Durkheim conceived a post-industrial concept for mature adult life in countryside communities. I found an answer for childhood and adolescence only by raising two children in a 25 million city and observing the effects of the so-called Nature Deficit Disorder in them and their classmates.



### Countryside as Educational Spaces During Childhood

The umbrella term [nature deficit disorder](#) was coined in 2005 by author [Richard Louv](#) in his book [Last Child in the Woods](#). Louv argued that the alienation from the natural world leads to a plethora of problems, which are rarely traced back to nature deprivation. The Children & Nature Network, a non-profit which is dedicated to reconnect children with the natural world, lists in its [research section](#) a number of scientific studies which confirm that limited exposure to nature leads to an increased probability of

- Attention disorder
- Hyperactivity disorder
- Obesity
- Depression
- Slowed cognitive development
- Reduced creativity

Richard Louv argues that the effects of the nature deficit disorder on our children will be an even bigger problem in the future: *An increasing pace in the last three decades, approximately, of a rapid disengagement between children and direct experiences in nature...has profound implications, not only for the health of future generations but for the health of the Earth itself.*

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If we want to save our children, we need to connect them to nature; and the more we connect to nature the more likely it is that we clean up the mess we have created so far. That's what Victorian poet Mary Anne Evans aka [George Eliot](#) anticipated when she wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: *We could never have learned to love the earth so well, if we had had no childhood in it.*

In order to save the planet, we either need to venture outdoors as much as possible to seek the direct encounter with nature or – and this is my main recommendation for a Citymaker 2.0 program - rethink the concept of countryside as living and educational space for childhood and adolescence. While such a transformation won't happen within a few years, I am convinced this is the way forward: assessing the meaning and end of education and how it relates to the spaces we inhabit will guide us as a species for the better or worse.



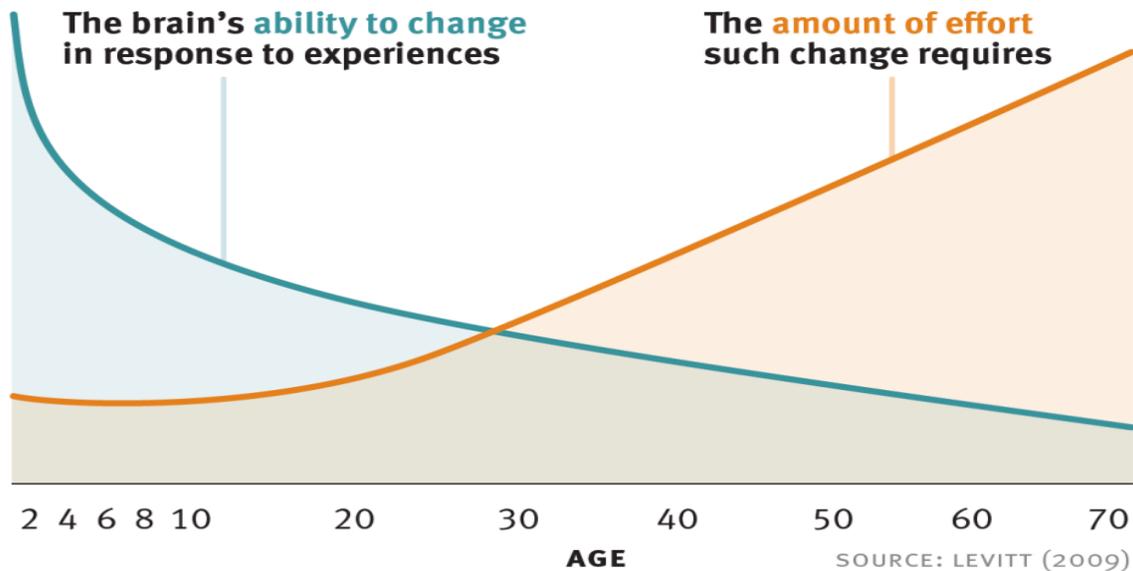
Educator [Maria Montessori](#) spoke in her pedagogical anthropology of four learning planes, each lasting six years and ending at age 24. Rudolf Steiner also conceived four learning phases: three lasting seven years each, the last self-directed adult learning from age 21 onwards. Neither of them, and no other educator or psychologist I know of, have so far connected learning and human development with the environment at large.

I propose that we structure learning into three planes which stretch over an entire life span. When Montessori developed her method of alternative education more than a century ago, urbanization was in Europe not even where it is now in China. While her focus was on providing the poorest of the poor in Rome's St. Lorenzo district a solid education by getting them away from the streets,



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we nowadays are asked to get children back into the woods, unhook them from screens and reduce digital sensorial stimulation. It is during early childhood that the human brain is most malleable, and we need to cease this window of opportunity to rear a generation of environmentalist if we want our species to prosper in peace and harmony. We won't be able to do that in urban concrete jungles.



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[www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

During ages 18-35 we strengthen our identities, find intimacy and self-directed learning. It is during this period that we have most energy to connect to many fellow humans and it is in cities that we find the opportunity to meet them. After age 35, a phase which Erickson calls generativity, i.e. taking responsibility of caring for someone else, people are usually occupied with parenting duties, which are easier to be fulfilled in the countryside, where they also coincide with the need of children to be stimulated by nature. At age 35 latest, we should have found what we would like to do with the rest of our lives and can move into smaller countryside communities of likeminded folks in the way Durkheim has envisioned them.

### China's Role and Citymakers' Potential

China is a late comer to the industrial revolution and some of the above observations will play out delayed, but China's growing role in driving man-made global warming piles pressure onto world politicians to agree on a new global agreement on climate change that includes the booming Chinese economy. Yet, it has been difficult to find agreements with China in top-down policies; and bottom up strategies might be the only realistic way to include the Chinese population in an effort to avoid runaway climate change.

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The Citymaker network has grown over the years into a veritable platform of European and Chinese individuals with diverse backgrounds and from different walks of life. It is a potential hotbed for such bottom up strategies and could - if brought in play smartly – trigger a larger transformation.



3. You are moving back to Europe after 20 years in China. What do you take with you as inspiration/gains? What do you look forward to in Europe?

When I left Europe two decades ago, I was looking for a new way to conceive life, the world and myself. I have certainly found this perspective in Taoism and Buddhism. Returning to Europe, I look forward to a less penetrating state, lower population densities, cultural diversity, and easy access to relatively unspoiled nature.

Having been removed from my native culture for such a long time, I was also able to distill what I want to keep from what I want to drop, a process which Carl G. Jung labelled as individuation. I have dropped very unhealthy dietary habits like meat and alcohol consumption. I look forward to summer hikes and winter ski touring; and the opportunity to instill this affection of active nature experience into our children.



4. What is your personal vision for the future of living? And for (Europe China) learning communities?

In the last book I have read, a biography of Steve Jobs, an less important passage about his foster parents resonated with me strongly: *Like many who lived through the war, they had experienced enough excitement that, when it was over, they desired simply to settle down, raise a family, and lead a less eventful life.*<sup>xv</sup>

20 years China have felt occasionally like a war. During my years in the corporate world, I did definitely fight in the trenches of a business battlefield; and despite mental and physical exhaustion I was always intellectually stimulated and intrigued. I have had enough, and my focus is on raising our children in a healthy environment.

I didn't find that environment in China, but I hope to find like-minded parents who want to connect a more liberal European society with a few enlightened elements of Chinese culture in transgenerational living and learning communities. Projects like the Garden of Generations are blazing the trail for such cohabitation. Architects, psychologists, teachers, farmers, gardeners and homemakers from diverse cultural backgrounds are challenged to make such projects a reality, which goes beyond single initiatives.<sup>xvi</sup>



5. You are a member of the Citymaker-Accelerator project with the Green Steps ARK. What is your project intending to achieve? What is the vision? In how far did it accelerate in the last months?

The ARK aims at a radical but gradual transformation of human behavioral architecture and the acceleration of environmental education. We have prototyped a gamified social network which drives offline community building and nature connection.

It has accelerated only marginally, since we struggle with getting our concept and ideas into code. As a startup which operates at the intersection of ecology, education and IT, we believe in technology as an agent for social and environmental good, but face like most other social entrepreneurs the challenges of limited resources.



6. You are a systems thinker and have an overview on the social entrepreneurship eco system in Shanghai and now a bit in Berlin/Europe. What do you observe? Same same but different? Which dots could be connected? How could we combine our efforts?

There is quite a bit of same same but different. My main observation is that human beings no matter whether politicians or social entrepreneurs waste a lot of energy in communication. Even if intentions and mindsets are alike, there is too little mutual trust to transcend the current economic system and leap into a new way of working together.

The ARK is therefore conceived as a platform which - like Airbnb - creates such mutual trust, but not in order to exploit – like Airbnb – tax revenues from national governments – but to add social and environmental value to communities and commons.

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<sup>i</sup> John Calhoun's mouse experiments: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Z760XNy4VM>

<sup>ii</sup> The Sane Society: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/40717990-the-sane-society>

<sup>iii</sup> On the alienating effects of modern capitalism watch the documentary [Economics of Happiness](#)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/ex/sustainablecitiescollective/china-s-new-urbanization-plan-obstacles-and-environmental-impacts/246981/>

<sup>v</sup> 为什么疫情之后这么多孩子选择了自杀? <https://www.zhihu.com/question/399544938>

<sup>vi</sup> Watch the documentary Bright Cities, Brilliant Minds: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04fh387>



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vii Watch the documentary The Human Scale: <http://www.thehumanscale.dk/thefilm/>

viii Where Good Ideas Come From: A Natural History of Innovation:  
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8034188-where-good-ideas-come-from>

ix Neil Postman 1990 lecture "Informing Ourselves to Death": <https://motamem.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/informing-ourselves-to-death-neil-postman.pdf>

x Henry Kissinger: World Order: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1181246582>

xi Adam Alter: *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*  
<https://www.economist.com/1843/2020/04/29/can-we-escape-from-information-overload>

xiii [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erikson%27s\\_stages\\_of\\_psychosocial\\_development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erikson%27s_stages_of_psychosocial_development)

xiv Division of Labor and Social Integration: <http://www.brooklynsoc.org/courses/43.1/durkheim.html>

xv Steve Jobs by Walter Isaacson:  
[https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3524934253?book\\_show\\_action=false&from\\_review\\_page=1](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3524934253?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=1)

xvi <http://www.gartendergenerationen.net/>