

6. The elementary forms of future-making

Sacrality and contingency at Hamburg's building exhibition

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Introduction

With the onset of secular modernity, the future opened up. No longer the outcome of divine determination, the future came to be seen as a realm malleable to human desire: It became, indeed, contingent. The historian Reinhart Koselleck (2004) captured this shift powerfully in his seminal book *Futures Past*. As the authority of Christian dogma receded in 18th-century Europe, what people experienced in the past (the 'space of experience') ceased to determine what would happen in the future (the 'horizon of expectation'). Futures scholars Barbara Adam and Chris Groves (2007: 89) made a similar point in their *Future Matters*. 'By the time the idea of progress had taken hold, people rather than their gods were in charge of the future', they wrote, immediately adding that 'with this shift in ownership, the future became a social rather than a sacred domain'. Raymond Williams (1973), finally, showed in his largely overlooked *The Country and the City* how the waning potency of Christian narratives of apocalypse and salvation opened the way for humanistic visions of urban futures to take root. In sum: As modernity desacralized, the future became a contingent construct.

Or so the prevailing narrative suggests. In this chapter, however, I propose that whilst the future did indeed become contingent in secular modernity, the sayings and doings of urban future-makers continue to resemble religious praxis. To make this point, I draw inspiration from Émile Durkheim's (1912) sociological classic *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and from the 'sociology of the sacred' that emerged in its wake (Alexander, 2003; Giesen, 2006; Lynch, 2012a). Central to this tradition is the claim that secularization does not render 'the sacred' obsolete. Instead, 'the sacred' is understood in Durkheimian soci-

ology as that which holds high moral value for social actors, while its opposite, ‘the profane’, names that which threatens, endangers, or metaphorically pollutes the sacred. Furthermore, essential to the Durkheimian gaze is the argument that social actors’ engagements with the sacred and the profane emerge during times of ‘collective effervescence’, a term which refers to those periods in social life when the usual limits to thought and action are temporarily suspended. Durkheimians thus locate the essence of religion not in the systematic devotion to supernatural beings, but in social actors’ periodic projection of moral meaning onto the lifeworld. Once we start to look at religion as a moral rather than a theological practice, we become able to interpret even the most secular of activities – such as reimagining the future as a contingent realm – in religious terms. Traversing this chapter is thus the following formula: The future became contingent, but sacrality remained – albeit in a moral rather than a purely theological form.

To give empirical substance to the above, I turn in this chapter to Hamburg’s building exhibition held between 2006 and 2013. ‘Building exhibition’ – formally known as an ‘international building exhibition’, *Internationale Bauausstellung*, or IBA – is the name given to a German model of city-making, originating in Stuttgart at the dawn of the 20th century and nomadically moving from city to city ever since. Host cities may invoke a building exhibition when they deem their existing planning routines as inadequate to tackle some of the city’s urbanistic challenges. In response, a committee of high-profile professionals – architects, urbanists, engineers – congregates in the host city to develop and display the latest advances in urbanism and architecture. They are, as John Urry (2016: 11) put it, given ‘the power to make the future’. Building exhibitions constitute an urban variant of the more widely recognized world’s fairs, where the idea of a predetermined future was similarly cast aside in favour of a marked confidence in the future’s intrinsic contingency (De Cauter, 1993; Roche, 1998). Moreover, building exhibitions continue to be part of the larger amalgam of urban future-making practices, as their central aim remains to imagine and actualize the so-called city of tomorrow (Robinson, 2024).

The Hamburg exhibition went by the name *Leap Across the Elbe*. The river Elbe divides Hamburg into northern and southern halves, two areas that differ not only in spatial location but also in socio-economic prosperity (Chamberlain, 2020; Volont, 2024). While the north is typically perceived as the city’s affluent centre, the south has long been framed as its problematic periphery. Heavy industry, major transport arteries, waste dumps, and coal-fired power

plants have systematically been relegated to the southern corridor. The Elbe Islands have also served as arrival zones for vulnerable migrant populations, seeking employment in the dirtier, more hazardous jobs in Hamburg's harbour economy. Furthermore, in 1962, the south suffered a catastrophic storm surge that breached dikes, killed over 300 people, and left thousands homeless. And, in 1984, it became the stage of an ecological scandal when toxic fluids were found leaking from the Georgswerder industrial waste dump. These events underscore the social, ecological, and infrastructural divide between Hamburg's two halves, a divide the *Leap Across the Elbe* aimed to overcome.

Hamburg's building exhibition constitutes an emblematic expression of the secular belief in the future's contingency – and yet, the aim of this chapter is to think sacrality and contingency together, rather than to posit them as mutually exclusive. The chapter will therefore develop as follows. In the next section, I lay some theoretical groundwork by shedding more light on Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* and its larger effects within the sociology of the sacred. Thereafter, in the three subsequent sections, I point to three intersections between sacrality and contingency at Hamburg's building exhibition. Under 'Sacrality and contingency I: From the sacred time of collective effervescence to a positive state of exception', I show how Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence is highly relevant to explain how the future is rendered contingent in secular contexts. More precisely, what is called the 'sacred time of collective effervescence' in Durkheim emerged at the building exhibition as a 7-year 'state of exception'. This entailed a temporary suspension of the usual limits of institutionalized urban planning, resulting in the loosening of regulatory constraints, the unleashing of futural imagination, and an embrace of experimentality. Then, under 'Sacrality and contingency II: Moral meaning-making through the sacred and the profane', I focus on the worldviews held by the exhibition's future-makers as they sought to render the future contingent. In particular, I show how they discursively coded the urban lifeworld as being torn between sacred and profane forces: winning versus losing, curiosity versus fear, risk versus tradition, and the city as a whole versus its southern corridor, respectively. Finally, under 'Sacrality and contingency III: Built forms as iconic condensations of contingency', I turn to the exhibition's material output. I posit the exhibition's 'lighthouse projects' – buildings intended to be gazed at by observing publics – as iconic symbolizations of the future's fundamental openness. I show how these projects' material surface was given symbolic depth through rituals, such as ceremonial openings or the laying of a foundation stone, ultimately turning the lighthouse projects into sacred representations of the future's makeability.

The conclusion constitutes less a definite claim than an invitation to further debate. I finally suggest that the aforementioned three intersections between sacrality and contingency allow one to recognize similar forms of power among priests, prophets, and future-makers. Despite their differing engagements with the future, these actors similarly deploy discursive and material means to determine within the social edifice which forms of life ought to be led and which ought to be avoided. Yet whether these forms of life will prove to be just and equitable remains, of course, an open question.

The Durkheimian sociology of the sacred: A theoretical preamble

The sociology of the sacred has its roots in the work of Émile Durkheim, the French founder of sociology, and more precisely in Durkheim's (1912) pivotal *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Durkheim's endeavour was to discover the universal characteristics of religious praxis. When we strip religion to its bare essence, hence to its 'elementary forms', what is it that remains? Durkheim famously found the essence of religion not in its 'content' – for example, the presence of supernatural beings – but in its deeper symbolic structure. This deeper structure was nothing other than the moral contrast between the sacred and the profane, a symbolic dyad through which social actors morally 'classify' their surrounding lifeworld (Durkheim and Mauss, 1903). As befits a structuralist thinker, Durkheim (1912: 38), with regards to this essential dyad, argued that 'in all the history of human thought, there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another'.¹ And as stated before, Durkheim consistently pointed to the fact that social actors' consciousness of the sacred and the profane emerges particularly

1 Post-structuralists will likely cringe at the very notion of two mutually exclusive categories. And rightly so: They might argue that framing the sacred and the profane as binary opposites reinforces a conservative, perhaps even regressive, vision of the social world – one in which distinctions such as man and woman, good and bad, us and them, young and old, and countless other classificatory schemes are reproduced as if no ambiguity or grey zone exists. However, to identify the deployment of the sacred and the profane within a particular lifeworld does not automatically entail intellectual endorsement of such distinctions. It is crucial to distinguish between 'descriptive' and 'prescriptive' theorizing. In this chapter, I aim not to 'prescribe' or endorse these categories, but simply to 'describe' how they are mobilized by social actors in the realm of future-making.

during the sacred times of collective effervescence: those periods in social life when the usual limits to thought and action are temporarily suspended. Secular phenomena such as festivals, protests, and decidedly also projects of future-making, as will be shown below, can thus be seen as ‘effervescent’ intervals during which the moral dyad of the sacred and the profane moves to the forefront of consciousness.

Elementary Forms was Durkheim’s final book, completed 5 years before his 1917 death.² However, in the grander scheme of the history of social theory, it wouldn’t take long before a group of socially critical scholars – among them Michel Leiris, Georges Bataille, and Roger Caillois – began to meet in the late 1930s in Parisian cafés to establish the infamous Collège de Sociologie, where a post-Durkheimian ‘sacred sociology’ would be practiced. Heavily inspired by the *Elementary Forms*, and largely opposing the then-dominant Freudian emphasis on the individual subconscious, the Collège sought out traces of the sacred within the collective life of French society. Yet the *Collège* diverged from Durkheimian orthodoxy in one key respect: While Durkheim saw the sacred as a normative force capable of restoring social order in a fractured France – we must remember that his later work emerged amid the First World War and the fallout of the Dreyfus Affair – the *Collège* repurposed the sacred as a critical lens to expose the symbolic mechanisms underpinning oppressive systems, most notably fascism. Though I refrain from considering future-making itself as oppressive, this chapter follows the *Collège’s* lead in using the sacred as an heuristic to critically uncover the symbolic operations at play during practices of future-making; I will return to this point in the conclusion.

Fast forward, then, to the new millennium. ‘It is often claimed that we live in a secular age. But we do not live in a desacralized one’, wrote Gordon Lynch (2012a) in *The Sacred in the Modern World*. Whilst modernity has been cast as a secular age, Lynch and his colleagues argue, again in Durkheimian fashion, that the symbolic dyad of the sacred and the profane continues to be woven through contemporary, secular life: It structures politics (Giesen, 2006), capitalism (Coudert, 2023), and media (Lynch, 2012b), to name a few.

For Jeffrey Alexander (2003), analysing the sacred within secular contexts constitutes a kind of *social psychoanalysis*. Sociologists of the sacred thus delve into the collective consciousness and concerted actions of a particular social

2 The chroniclers of Durkheim’s biography (Strenski, 2010; Smith, 2020) relate his sudden death to the grief following the passing of his son, who died as a soldier in the First World War.

world – in the case of this chapter, the world of professional future-making – to uncover how, when, and by what means social actors morally classify their surrounding lifeworld. The sociology of the sacred is thus an attempt to render the invisible visible. Future-makers rarely, if ever, speak explicitly in terms of ‘the sacred’ or ‘the profane’, yet sociologists of the sacred reveal how this binary operates beneath the surface – as a latent force, almost a grammar, shaping what is said and done in particular contexts.³

The sociology of the sacred thus transcends the long-standing theoretical divide between structuralism (which posits that action is largely shaped by supra-individual structures) and hermeneutics (with its emphasis on interpreting actors’ meaning-making) (Alexander, 2003, 2004; Lynch, 2012a). The synthesis of these approaches, known as *structural hermeneutics*, underpins this chapter. The ‘structural’ refers to the latent oppositions of sacred and profane; the ‘hermeneutic’ to the interpretation of social actors’ thoughts, texts, and actions. In this vein, my account is based on an extended examination of a wide range of public documents related to Hamburg’s building exhibition, including promotional materials, the exhibition’s inaugural memorandum *Sprung über die Elbe*,⁴ policy papers issued by the city administration, transcripts of speeches by architects and planners, recapitulations of meetings

3 The attentive reader may notice a number of sociological parallels between the sociology of the sacred and the ‘praxeological’ approach developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977). Yet there are pivotal divergences between the kind of sociology pursued in this chapter and the Bourdieusian perspective. In Bourdieu’s framework, culture functions primarily as a dependent variable: as something social actors draw upon, mobilize, and manipulate to maintain or enhance their social position within a given field. By contrast, Durkheim-inspired sociologists of the sacred emphasize culture’s ‘relative autonomy’ (see, e.g., Alexander, 2003). Here, culture is not a reflection of social position but an independent variable: Narratives, rituals, and meaningful objects – including the sacred/profane distinctions they carry – are not merely strategic tools but constitutive forces in social life. They are imagined, enacted, and sustained by actors, and once established, they shape social realities in their own right. This perspective also entails a different view of the social actor: not as a purely profit-seeking or strategic agent, but as a meaning-making being, capable of moral judgment and critical reflection. The choice between these two opposing frameworks is not a matter of right or wrong, but rather one of intellectual affinity.

4 A memorandum is a formal document established before the commencement of a project. It outlines the terms and agreements reached by collaborating parties – in this case, the City of Hamburg and the exhibition’s organizing committee. All non-English quotations from the memorandum have been translated by the author.

and conferences, and white papers authored by the exhibition's participating urbanists.

In sum, my structural-hermeneutical account of urban future-making is a document-based one. The focus on documents is deliberate: They represent the final consolidation of the meanings that social actors choose to project into the public sphere. Documents capture, in their finished form, what actors involved in a particular phenomenon wish to render legible to their observing publics. Of course, documents often mark the endpoint of longer 'backstage' processes of revision and adaptation; processes that typically remain inaccessible to the scholar. Yet it is precisely this final form, the version actors choose to circulate publicly, that interests me, for it reflects what they ultimately want to be seen, known, and understood. The results of that exercise are now discussed in three sections exploring the intersections between sacrality and contingency at Hamburg's building exhibition.

Sacrality and contingency I: From the sacred time of collective effervescence to a positive state of exception

In *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim was fascinated by societies' cyclical meandering between routinized periods of everyday life on the one hand and celebratory periods of religious devotion on the other.⁵ When the rules, rhythms, and routines of daily existence are temporarily suspended, periods of '*collective effervescence*' emerge. These periods constituted for Durkheim a 'sacred time' in which the usual limits to thought and action are lifted. After all, '*effervescence*' stems etymologically from *ex* (out, up) and *fervescere* (to boil), evoking the image of something that 'boils up'. The sacred time of collective effervescence, then, is a period in which thoughts and actions that would ordinarily be unthinkable or withheld are allowed to 'emerge out of' the social self. Think, for example, of the loosening of mores, of the dancing and singing, and of the mythical storytelling emerging during periods of religious festivity.

Now, the point I want to make in this section is that a structurally similar dynamic can be recognized at Hamburg's building exhibition. There, too, we find a movement back and forth between routinization on the one hand and effervescence on the other. More precisely, the building exhibition presupposed a

5 In Christian liturgical cycles, one recognizes the cyclical meandering between Ordinary Time and Holy Time (see, for instance, Eliade, 1987).

temporary suspension of the usual logics of institutionalized urban planning. At Hamburg's building exhibition, such suspension was called a 'positive state of exception'⁶ and was deemed necessary to open up the city's future to multiple possibilities.

The exhibition's state of exception ran from 1 September 2006 to 3 November 2013. In a booklet accompanying the exhibition, the exhibition's CEO Uli Hellweg (2013: 22) almost literally replicated Durkheimian vocabulary, writing that 'all building exhibitions have one thing in common: a time out of the ordinary life to create something new'. The suspension of the city's planning echelons' institutional restrictions was lauded, for example, by an urbanist giving a speech at one of the 'IBA meets IBA' conferences, which were held throughout the 7 years of the exhibition's lifespan. 'Building exhibitions', the urbanist put it, must 'abandon' and 'leave administrative routine, which presents unreasonable demands for all those involved and affected' (Koch, 2013). The prevailing view was that institutionalized planning is slow, bureaucratic, and dull – that it constitutes a habitual form of spatial production that hampers the emergence of newness.

But once the usual logics of institutionalized planning were suspended, what, in turn, did this suspension make possible? First, and logically following from the aforementioned suspension of institutional structures, the state of exception freed the exhibition's urbanists and architects from regulatory constraints. More precisely, they were less bound than usual by the bureaucratic hold of the city's planning apparatus. 'Building exhibitions', one relatedly reads in the exhibition's inaugural memorandum, must allow the future-maker to 'detach from the regulations of everyday planning for a limited period of time to try out new forms and processes' (IBA Hamburg, 2005: 31). The building exhibition, the memorandum continued, had to generate 'speed without volatility', 'destandardization without loss of quality', and 'flexibility without arbitrariness' (ibid.: 31). During the exhibition's state of exception, administrative procedures, including permissions for urban interventions, were able to be accelerated.

6 Urban states of exception, for example during mega-events such as economic summits or the Olympic Games, have been discussed in urban research before (Baptista, 2013; Fariás and Flores, 2017). Less theorized, however, is the religious nature of such states of exception, a lacuna that this chapter seeks to fill (but for an exception to the rule, albeit one that is rooted in a different theoretical framework, see Schinkel and Van Den Berg, 2011).

Second, the state of exception entailed an unleashing of futural imagination. The suspension of mundane forms of city-making was thus not merely a procedural shift; it was also an invitation to participating architects, urbanists, and engineers to shed the yoke of cognitive constraints. Urbanistic 'big shots' – 'the crème de la crème of the planning profession', as one introductory speaker put it at the 'IBA meets IBA' conference (Doehler-Behzadi, 2013) – were flown to Hamburg to present their visions for the future. Among them were Richard Sennett and Saskia Sassen, the former a renowned urban theorist and planner, the latter the author of the canonical *The Global City* (Sassen, 2002). Furthermore, the 7-year exhibition was punctuated by numerous seminars, conferences, and expert meetings during which urbanistic scriptures – the kinds of texts having high symbolic value within the larger community of urban future-making – were dusted off in order to gain inspiration for the future: Henri Lefebvre's musings on 'differential space', Peter Sloterdijk's ideas on 'urban atmospheres', and Jane Jacobs's defences of 'lively cities', to name a few. In this vein, the sacred times interspersing religious liturgical calendars are similarly marked by a systematic inspection of holy scriptures.

Third, the state of exception entailed an intensified movement towards urban experimentation. Anno 2025, 'experimentation' has become a buzzword in the world of urban future-making (see, for instance, Grubbauer et al., 2024), yet at Hamburg's 2006–2013 building exhibition, the dominance of the experiment could already be felt (Chamberlain, 2020). The first sentence encountered by any reader exploring the exhibition's online discourse is this one: 'At an IBA, people are researching and developing live, just like in a lab, within a given time frame' (IBA Hamburg, 2007b). The exhibition's memorandum stated similarly that 'the experimental possibilities of a building exhibition offer the chance to look for exactly these new paths' (IBA Hamburg, 2005: 24), and a participating urbanist argued at one of the aforementioned 'IBA meets IBA' events that 'new insights into the possibilities of urban change cannot be obtained without experiments and risks' (Koch, 2013). The embrace of experimentality meant that several projects were imagined on paper but never fully realized, while other projects – such as the Georgswerder Energy Hill, to which I return below – were developed in an explicitly experimental spirit.

In sum: The loosening of regulatory constraints, the unleashing of futural imagination, and the embrace of experimentation all reveal how the secular practice of exploring contingent futures resembles the sacred time of collective effervescence. One might argue that during this so-called state of exception it was attempted to suspend the laws of cause and consequence. The historical

trajectory Hamburg had been on – namely the decades-long struggle with the harms of the southern section – was rendered contingent, opened up, given new directions, reinstated. As can be read in one of the exhibition's accompanying documents: It is all about exploring 'the uncharted territory of the future' (IBA Hamburg, 2013a).

Sacrality and contingency II: Moral meaning-making through the sacred and the profane

In the previous section, I showed how the suspension of the usual logics of institutionalized planning gave rise to the exhibition's *state of exception* – a temporal rupture reminiscent of Durkheim's notion of the sacred time of collective effervescence. I now turn to this 7-year interlude in more depth, focusing on the worldviews held by the exhibition's protagonists as they sought to render the future contingent. This section proposes that these actors' beliefs about the urban lifeworld were structured by a symbolic struggle between sacred and profane forces. This struggle, furthermore, exerted a coercive influence on the exhibition's key actors: It compelled action and urged them to render the future contingent. Such dynamics constitute an elementary mechanism of religious life more broadly: It is precisely in sustained periods of effervescence – liturgical holy time, mythic storytelling in ancient societies, festivals in late-modernity – that social actors become temporarily attuned to what they regard as sacred (and thus attractive) and profane (and thus repulsive).

'The global trend is clear: Winning and losing regions are broadly apparent', declared one of the exhibition's urbanists during an event in the Hamburg Senate aimed at rallying support for the building exhibition (Sieverts, 2004). Meant here was the growing divide between cities perceived as attractive among white-collar workers, investors, and tourists on the one hand, and cities neglected, bypassed, and cast aside on the other. Immediately afterward, the same urbanist posed a rhetorical question to his audience – consisting of political dignitaries and planning officials – asking whether they wished to view the future as 'a depressing space of fear' or as 'a curious space of possibilities' (Sieverts, 2004). The exhibition's CEO, furthermore, invoked in one of the project's booklets the legacy of the early 20th-century building exhibitions.⁷ All

7 One of the previous iterations still etched in the collective consciousness of current IBA organizers is the 1927 edition in Stuttgart, which featured contributions from figures

building exhibitions', he wrote, 'sought to overcome the traditional. The initiators' courage, risk appetite, and enthusiasm were preconditions' (Hellweg, 2013: 22). In these expressions, we encounter what Alexander (2003; 2012) described as a 'dyadic discourse'. The exhibition's organizers may be said to enact an urban cosmology shaped by stark oppositions between sacred and profane forces: winning versus losing, curiosity versus fear, the embrace of risk versus an attachment to tradition.

The classificatory cosmology of the exhibition's involved professionals becomes even more evident when we examine their conceptions of Hamburgian forms of life. As noted in the introduction, the Elbe Islands have long borne the weight of a difficult history. Shaped by the systematic concentration of heavy industry in Hamburg's south, as well as by events such as the 1962 storm surge and the 1984 Georgswerder dioxin scandal, the area has been persistently associated with the intersecting burdens of ecological degradation, infrastructural decay, and social segregation. Against this backdrop, one of the exhibition's on-line information sheets declared that the Elbe Islands would be transformed from 'a city backwater' and 'a choked inner periphery' into 'a prime example of urban renaissance' (IBA Hamburg, 2013b). In another project statement, it was argued that 'every IBA has its own special location. In Hamburg it is the Elbe Islands of Wilhelmsburg, Veddel, and Harburg Upriver Port' (IBA Hamburg, 2007a). And in the exhibition's memorandum, the Elbe Islands had already appeared as 'a potpourri leaving quite ambivalent impressions' and as 'a dense juxtaposition of problem areas' (IBA Hamburg, 2005: 23). The classificatory logic that emerges here positions the city of Hamburg as *sacred*, namely as a socio-material entity having the highest moral value, while casting the city's southern districts as *profane*, namely as an area that harms, threatens, and pollutes the city as a whole.

It must be added that the struggle between the larger city and its profane south, as reported in the exhibition's aforementioned discourse, continued a longer lineage of meaning-making in which the Elbe Islands were stigmatized as the city's problematic appendage. Newspaper coverage of the Elbe Islands around the turn of the millennium tended to focus on local acts of violence, characterizing the Islands as 'the Bronx of the north' (Hamburger Abendblatt,

such as Ludwig Hilberseimer, Le Corbusier, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. It is worth noting the heavily gendered nature of the IBA – and urban future-making general – at this point. For a critique of this nature, see Beatriz Colomina's (2000) *Sexuality and Space*.

2000) and as ‘a place of poverty, unemployment, and foreigners’ (Gipp, 2001). A later article concerning the infrastructural decline of the Islands framed them as ‘a neighbourhood in crisis’ (Twickel, 2011). Popular culture echoed this perception as well, most notably in Fatih Akin’s 2009 movie *Soul Kitchen* (Strüver, 2015). In an infamous scene, the main character informs a friend about the location of his future restaurant: Wilhelmsburg. The friend’s jaw immediately drops: Of all places, why there?

When lifeworlds become divided into forces of good and evil, it is only a matter of time before the language of ‘sin’ begins to surface. In 1929, Fritz Schumacher – Hamburg’s influential early 20th-century head of urban planning – once famously declared: ‘Geest land is for living, marshland is for working’ (Schubert, 2021). While the city is geographically split between the drylands north of the Elbe and the wetlands to its south, Schumacher’s dictum crystallized this natural divide into a rigid social and economic hierarchy. Schumacher’s pronouncement laid the groundwork for successive waves of industrial development in Hamburg’s southern districts, further entrenching socio-economic and ecological asymmetries between the city’s upper and lower halves. Though widely celebrated as one of Hamburg’s most visionary urbanists, Schumacher was subtly recast by the exhibition’s organizers as the author of what might be called an ‘*originary sin*’, a foundational act through which the city’s subsequent profanities emerged. In the memorandum, for example, it was argued that Schumacher’s ‘compartmentalized plan’ had to be overcome by turning the Elbe Islands into a locus of ‘urban redevelopment’ (IBA Hamburg, 2005: 22).

Importantly, the perceived struggle between sacred and profane forces exerted a coercive influence on the future-makers themselves. That is, the ensemble of the aforementioned world-views operated as a supra-individual repertoire of meaning; it constituted a symbolic framework that urged, even compelled, the exhibition’s actors to render the future contingent, malleable, open to transformation. ‘Hamburg has been rebuilt and rebuilt several times, not only after the Great Fire or the Second World War’, declared Olaf Scholz (2013), then the mayor of Hamburg, at one of the exhibition’s conferences; continuing, he stated: ‘what we do know, is that we can shape the future’. Similarly, an online project statement declared that ‘there is probably no better place in Germany to investigate the future of our cities, as it [Hamburg’s southern section] presents us with all the problems and opportunities’ (IBA Hamburg, 2007a). Such utterances reveal how a dyadic vision of the urban fabric – structured around the symbolic tension between forces of good and evil – obligated the

exhibition's key actors to remake the future, hence to choose contingency over determination.

Finally, I would like to argue that it is worthwhile to re-read a series of canonical texts within the realm of urban future-making – as well as the visions for future urban life they imply – through the lens of the sacred and the profane. Rather than assessing these texts and visions in terms of their technical feasibility, we might instead consider the moral dimensions they entail. Ebenezer Howard's (1902) *Garden Cities of To-morrow* can be seen as articulating a struggle between the ills of industrial pollution and the redemptive promise of the green city. Ludwig Hilberseimer's (1944) *The New City* envisions an eternal battle between the chaos of the modern metropolis and the sacrality of rational order. Constant Nieuwenhuys's (1959) *New Babylon* casts the urban commonwealth as torn between the profanities of functionalist rigidity and the sacred remedy of play. And in each of these cases, it is precisely the tension between the sacred and the profane that animates and determines the authors' envisioning of new, hence contingent, urban futures.

Sacrality and contingency III: Built forms as iconic condensations of contingency

In the preceding sections, I discussed the exhibition's state of exception as well as the discursive construction of sacred and profane forces within that state of exception. Yet religious practice is also, fundamentally, a material one: One must only think of the erection of shrines, temples, churches, or holy statues in order to grasp how built forms permeate religious life. In *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim had already drawn attention to this material dimension, but as Alexander (2012: 16) argued, Durkheim 'opened the door, but he barely stepped inside' – let alone created analytic opportunities to think about sacred materiality in a city subject to the secular act of urban future-making. So, in what ways could we think of the intersection between sacred matter and contingency at Hamburg's building exhibition?

In this section, I would like to consider the exhibition's material output – more specifically its resulting buildings and infrastructures – as sacred icons representing the future's contingency. An icon, after all, is a profoundly religious phenomenon. In early Christianity, the term denoted highly sacred depictions of Jesus and the Saints (Solaroli, 2015) – depictions, furthermore, that from time to time were subject to effervescent acts of devotion. Yet, icons

permeate secular social life too. More particularly, secular icons can be seen as material entities whose ‘material surface’ carries a certain ‘symbolic depth’ (Alexander et al., 2012). And this is precisely what the exhibition’s buildings and infrastructures were meant to be: Their material surfaces were meant to symbolize the idea that the future could be otherwise. They constituted, in other words, iconic condensations of contingency.⁸

But first, something must be said about the exhibition’s overall morphology. Over 70 projects were completed as part of Hamburg’s building exhibition, each categorized within one of three thematic clusters, named ‘Cities and Climate Change’, ‘Cosmopolis’, and ‘Metrozones’. The cluster concerning climate change, devised in response to the Islands’ aforementioned ecological vulnerabilities, focused on renewable energy production. Photovoltaic panels, wind turbines, geothermal systems, and solar thermal collectors were introduced to create a locally powered urban fabric (IBA Hamburg, 2013c). The cluster regarding cosmopolitanism, conceived as an answer to the Islands’ assumed segregation, evolved around ethnic diversity. Creative quarters, language centres, and new public spaces were designed to cultivate what in planning circles is called ‘social mix’ (IBA Hamburg, 2013d). The cluster called ‘Metrozones’⁹ was intended to demonstrate how inner peripheries can be transformed into neighbourhoods worth living in’ (IBA Hamburg, 2013a). As such, the exhibition’s participating architects and urban designers aimed to undo the transitional character of the Elbe Islands, turning them instead into a residential area where container stacks, dockside cranes, and railways lines would blend with new homes and workplaces (IBA Hamburg, 2013a).

Yet, thinking of built forms as iconic condensations of contingency requires a consideration of the exhibition’s ‘lighthouse projects’. As described in the exhibition’s memorandum, ‘lighthouse projects’ was the name given to specific displays having ‘a special appeal to the audience’ (IBA Hamburg, 2005: 20). Lighthouse projects were ‘the projects that matter’; they were destined ‘to become symbols of Hamburg’s urban development ambitions’, altogether

8 Readers interested in ‘iconic architecture’ – albeit from a post-Marxist perspective – might delve into the work of Leslie Sklair (2006), Maria Kaika (2010) or Charles Jencks (2005).

9 Thus, Hamburg had to become not only a ‘cosmopolis’, but also a ‘metropolis’. The concept of metropolitanism was thus, etymologically speaking, taken literally: *metropolis* – derived from the Greek *mētēr* (mother) and *polis* (city) – implies an urban form in which a commanding centre governs its peripheries.

'demonstrating the topics of the future' (ibid.). Lighthouse projects, finally, had to 'develop charisma', to 'stand out', to 'create orientation' (ibid.: 32).

One of the lighthouse projects within the cluster on climate change was the Georgswerder Energy Hill. The aforementioned toxic Georgswerder waste dump had been transformed into a grassy hill with wind turbines on top: once a 'toxic landfill', now 'a hill of new horizons' (IBA Hamburg, 2013e). The project produced local energy through wind and solar power and contains to this day a visitor centre highlighting the hill's history. A lighthouse project within the cluster on cosmopolitanism was the Gateway to the World Educational Centre. Different educational faculties – a language centre, a social support unit, a primary school, and a science centre – were clustered around a central courtyard. The transparency of glass and the openness of space were intended to display a sense of cosmopolitan worldliness (IBA Hamburg, 2013f). Finally, a lighthouse project within the 'Metrozones' cluster was the Elbinsel Quarter, a newly designed residential area consisting of apartment blocks lined along the urban creeks characteristic of the Elbe Islands (IBA Hamburg, 2013g). In all, these lighthouse projects can be seen as iconic condensations of contingency: Their material surface was precisely intended to carry a symbolic depth, namely, to indicate that different futures were possible or, phrased differently, that the future could be contingent.

However, nothing is iconic by default. Objects and architectures only become icons through ritualized acts of iconization. It is therefore crucial to scrutinize the ceremonial doings and sayings that accompany such transformations – whether at the beginning, when a project is symbolically initiated, or at the end, when its built output is formally inaugurated. Consider, for instance, the laying of the foundation stone for the Gateway to the World Educational Centre by the mayor of Hamburg. Speaking before an audience of politicians, journalists, and citizens, the mayor proclaimed that the building exhibition sought to 'implement integrated city-planning and educational-policy models for the future', adding that 'the Gateway to the World Educational Centre is one such model, uniting great hopes and great tasks ahead'. Equally emblematic were the official openings of the exhibition's lighthouse projects, which were invariably marked by the unveiling of the 'IBA plaque' – a material emblem affixed to each display. The plaque, depicting a figure leaping over a blue stretch of water, embodied the exhibition's guiding theme: the aforementioned *Leap Across the Elbe*. At the inauguration of the Woodcube, a wooden apartment block in the Elbinsel Quarter, the mayor stated: 'By officially unveiling the IBA plaque for this building today, we are bringing its special features and fantas-

tic versatility to the attention of the public. It is therefore an excellent example of the innovative nature of the IBA' (IBA Hamburg Press Office, 2013). Such rituals, unfolding in and around these architectural sites, are central to their iconization. They inscribe symbolic meaning onto the icon's material surface, rendering them iconic condensations of contingency.

One year before the official 'presentation year', Hamburg's futural developments were showcased in an exhibition at the European Parliament titled *Building Cities Anew: Tomorrow's Metropolis*. Its stated aim was to 'spark an international exchange of ideas and to encourage people to visit Hamburg in 2013, the year of the IBA presentation' (IBA Hamburg Press Office, 2012). Speaking at the vernissage in Brussels, the exhibition's CEO addressed an audience of members of parliament and urban planners, proclaiming that 'in the coming year, IBA Hamburg will be celebrating its great presentation year after seven years of development', adding that 'it is a good point in time to encourage debate in a European context, and to show that Hamburg is a city of the future' (IBA Hamburg Press Office, 2012). Thus, concluding this chapter's tour throughout the religious dimensions of future-making, one might argue that the exhibition's lighthouse projects gave rise to new forms of secular pilgrimage. Through the fusion of material surface and symbolic depth, these architectural icons sought to draw publics from afar – inviting them to witness, in Hamburg, how the future could be imagined otherwise. If Hamburg, as Hellweg had it, constituted 'a city of the future' once the exhibition had been finished, aficionados of the built environment could undertake symbolic journeys to discover in the holy city of Hamburg what that future would look like. Against this backdrop, the exhibition's lighthouse projects embodied the persistence of auratic transcendence in the modern metropolis, for the buildings on display were intended to imbue upon the beholder less a fetishistic fascination with commodity objects than a collective consciousness of the future's contingency.

Conclusion: Of priests, prophets, and future-makers

With the onset of secular modernity, the future became a contingent construct. No longer the necessary consequence of divine determination, it emerged instead as a domain open to human desire. Scholars such as Koselleck (2004), Adam and Groves (2007), and Williams (1973) have gone to great lengths to clarify the interrelationship between the waning of institutionalized

religion on the one hand and the corresponding openness of the future on the other. As Adam and Groves (2007) so powerfully put it in their pivotal *Future Matters*, modern societies underwent a fundamental shift 'from providence to progress'. Such a shift was, of course, also an urban one: It was at the dawn of modernity that the urban future first began to emerge as contingent – as a realm of the not-yet, open to human desire and control.

Against this backdrop, I argued in this chapter that while the future did indeed become contingent in secular modernity, the sayings and doings of urban future-makers continue to resemble religious praxis. The seed of this argument lay in Durkheim's 1912 classic *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* as well as in the so-called sociology of the sacred that unfolded in its wake. Central to the late-Durkheimian tradition is the insight that secularization does not necessarily entail desacralization. Once we begin to understand the sacred and the profane as categories denoting, respectively, that which holds high moral value and that which provokes repulsion, we can start to explore the religious dimension of deeply secular practices, among them the secular practice of urban future-making. Consequently, my 'elementary forms of future-making' foregrounded three intersections between sacrality and contingency at Hamburg's building exhibition. First, following Durkheim's core insight that religious praxis emerges when the routine coordinates of everyday life are suspended, I examined the exhibition's 'state of exception' as a 7-year period of collective effervescence, characterized by loosened regulations, an unleashing of futural imagination, and a turn towards experimentation. Second, I argued that the exhibition's future-makers' world-views entailed an enduring struggle between sacred and profane forms of life – a struggle that imbued upon them a sense of moral urgency to shift the city's historical trajectory. Finally, I turned to the exhibition's material output, focusing on its so-called lighthouse projects. Through sustained ritualistic acts, these structures became iconic condensations of the future's contingency.

A conclusion that emerges from this Durkheimian exercise is less a definitive claim than a largely reflective invitation to further debate. While priests and prophets on the one hand, and urban future-makers on the other, engage with the future in fundamentally different ways, they nevertheless draw upon a similarly religious repertoire of action to render the future legible, and in doing so, they wield comparable forms of power in the larger social edifice. Since the rise of Christianity and its ensuing grip on social life in many societies, priests and prophets have fulfilled a pivotal social role: interpreting divine providence through preaching and prophesying and, from there, guiding

their constituencies towards the forms of life necessary for salvation in the afterlife. A similar statement can be made about secular future-makers. Secular future-makers may construe the future as radically open rather than divinely ordained, but they, too, set out to determine within the grander scheme of society which forms of life ought to be led and which are to be avoided. Through the case of Hamburg's building exhibition, we saw how the participating future-makers determined that the southern section of the city had to become 'climate resilient', 'cosmopolitan', and a 'metrozone'. In that sense, the exhibition's future-makers can be said to take centre stage – just like priests and prophets – as moral judges, as powerful actors symbolically distinguishing between good and evil ways of urban existence. Whether their reimagined futures will prove just and equitable further down the temporal line, remains, of course, an open question.

Finally, I would want to argue that both the sociological approach and the empirical findings presented in this chapter hold relevance beyond the specific case of Hamburg's building exhibition. The exhibition is but one instance within a broader constellation of cases in which powerful urban professionals set out to steer the future in new directions. We live in a time when built environment professionals – be they experimentalists, techno-optimists, transition thinkers, or post-humanists – are asserting themselves in public arenas as agents capable of shifting futures from predetermined trajectories to contingent realms. In this context, it is worthwhile to ask whether these findings on sacrality and contingency can be extended to the wider field of professional urban future-making. I thus hope to motivate social scientists to investigate the act of future-making not merely in terms of its technical accuracy, but through its underlying and often-overlooked moral dimension. Today, a wide array of cases present themselves for such inquiry. There is ample opportunity to bring to light how the moral dyad of the sacred and the profane permeates the doings and sayings of built environment professionals – and, by extension, how this dyad gives rise to secular rituals, icons, and prophecies of urban future-making. As I argued at the very beginning: The future became contingent, but the sacred remains.

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