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## **Designing Freedom: Examining the transition from rural to urban from the perspective of the capability approach**

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# thesis designing freedom

Examining the transition from rural to urban from the perspective of the capability approach

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*"The future of the world's population is urban."<sup>1</sup>*

*People move to the city for opportunities, money and a better life. When we look at this transition from a freedom perspective, instead of the common resource or utility views, you could question whether the city will always provide this better life. Do urban environments provide the freedoms we value, better than rural environments?*

*In this thesis I claim that certain freedoms, present in rural environments, actually get reduced when people move to the city, and that the urban spatial environment is a crucial factor in this. I will introduce Amartya Sen's capability approach to elaborate on the importance of capabilities, compared to other normative indicators of human flourishing. Sen's capability approach does not focus on resources or outcomes, but on the process whereby people flourish; the freedom people have to do and to be as they have reason to value. These substantive freedoms are divided by Sen in a freedom concerned with people's wellbeing (reflecting capabilities) and a freedom concerned with people's agency. This distinction is particularly relevant when we consider spatial environments. Where wellbeing freedom deals with the different opportunities open to people, agency freedom concerns the freedom people have to effectively shape and choose their own. By looking at concrete cases, I show that certain freedoms, while present in rural environments, are reduced by the spatial design of our cities, after which I present a number of inspirational design cases which are able to address these losses.*

*I conclude by arguing that, in designing our cities, there is reason to pay more attention to the rural valuing of freedom, both in providing alternative options for people to achieve wellbeing, and in providing space for people to exercise agency in order to conceive a wider range of valuable goals.*

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations (2019), *World Urbanisation Prospects 2018*, p. 3

**“While government and laws take care of the security and the wellbeing of men, the sciences, letters, and the arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains which weigh men down, snuffing out in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they appear to have been born, and make them love their slavery by turning them into what are called civilised people.”**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750)

## 1. Introduction

“The future of the world’s population is urban.”

With this line opens the 2018 United Nations report on the prospects of the world’s urbanisation. Since 1950 the world has gone through a process of rapid urbanisation. In that year two-thirds of the global population lived in rural areas. Currently half of the world’s people live in cities, and it is estimated, pandemic or not,<sup>2</sup> that by 2050 the world will be more than two-thirds urban, roughly the reverse of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

People move to the city for opportunities, money and a better life. The UN acknowledges the positive force of urbanisation on human development as they denote cities as hubs for development. They argue that “the proximity of commerce, government and transportation provides the infrastructure necessary for sharing knowledge and information”,<sup>4</sup> crucial for human development, which is defined as to enable all people to flourish.<sup>5</sup> This might make sense if we consider flourishing from a resource (input) or utility (outcome) perspective, but when we look at people’s capabilities, that what people are effectively able to do and to be, you could question the positive force of urbanisation on human flourishing. Do urban environments provide the capabilities we value, better than rural environments?

In this thesis I claim that certain capabilities, present in rural environments, actually get reduced when people move to the city, and that the urban spatial environment is a crucial factor in this. I will introduce Amartya Sen’s capability approach to elaborate on the importance of capabilities, compared to other normative indicators of human flourishing. Sen’s capability approach does not focus on resources or outcomes, but on the process whereby people flourish; the freedom people have to do and to be as they have reason to value. These substantive freedoms are divided by Sen in a freedom concerned with people’s wellbeing (reflecting capabilities) and a freedom concerned with people’s agency. This distinction is particularly relevant when we consider spatial environments. Where wellbeing freedom deals with the different opportunities open to people, agency freedom concerns the freedom people have to effectively shape and choose their own. By looking at concrete cases, I show that certain substantive forms of these freedoms, while present in rural environments,

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<sup>2</sup> The recent Covid-19 pandemic is said to bring about an exodus from major metropolitan areas, as people, in a reflex to avoid large crowds, return to the countryside. However, in a big survey by The Harris Poll in the autumn of 2020 they found that the vast majority of city dwellers in the United States, pandemic or not, still preferred to live in a big city: online at <https://theharrispoll.com/cities-are-not-going-away-according-to-urban-dwellers/> (accessed April 13, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> The UN projects that by 2030 there will not only be more, but also bigger urban areas, counting 43 megacities with over 10 million people, and a Greater Shanghai area being the first gigacity with over 100 million people (United Nations (2019), *World Urbanisation Prospects 2018*, p. 17)

<sup>4</sup> The wider citation: “Cities are places where entrepreneurship and technological innovation can thrive, thanks to a diverse and well-educated labour force and a high concentration of businesses. Urban areas serve as hubs for development, where the proximity of commerce, government and transportation provide the infrastructure necessary for sharing knowledge and information. Urban dwellers are often younger, more literate and more highly educated, are more likely to have access to decent work, adequate housing and social services, and can enjoy enhanced opportunities for cultural and political participation as well as gender equality. Economies of scale in urban areas and technological innovation can facilitate the sustainable provision of infrastructure such as roads, piped water and electricity, as well as basic services such as education and health care, all of which are essential to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, United Nations (2019), *World Urbanisation Prospects 2018*, p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Human flourishing or eudaimonia (Aristotle (384-322 BC), *Nicomachean Ethics*) is defined by Sabine Alkire as the expansion of wellbeing, agency and justice. She defines wellbeing as the expansion of people’s actual freedoms, agency as the empowerment of people, and justice as the expansion of both wellbeing and agency, in ways that expand equity and respect human rights (Alkire (2010), *Human Development: Definitions, Critiques and Related Concepts*, p. 23)

are reduced by the spatial design of our cities, after which I present a number of inspirational design cases which are able to address these losses.

Thus, I will begin by introducing the capability approach as the better evaluative space for human flourishing and I point out in what ways spatial environments can matter to capabilities. I introduce Sen's division of the evaluative space in wellbeing freedom and agency freedom, as they become important in the evaluation of spatial environments and I respond to Martha Nussbaum's criticism on this division. The operational use of the capability approach raises some challenges, which I will address before illustrating the loss of capabilities in peoples transition to the city. In comparing a Dutch rural settlement with the city of New York, I make these capability losses explicit and I show in what way urban spatial design is a factor in this. The observed losses are met by some inspiring design practices, as they make up for losses in both wellbeing freedom and agency freedom. These practices breathe the air of Richard Sennett's theory on open cities,<sup>6</sup> which in his view should be incomplete, uncertain and organic environments. I will elaborate on this endorsement and finally conclude by exploring the potential implications of the argument for urban design as a practice.

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<sup>6</sup> Sennett (2018), *Building and Dwelling*

## 2. The Capability Approach

The capability approach offers a different perspective on human development than alternative approaches that focus on the accumulation of material resources, or people's mental states, such as the overall satisfaction with life. The capability approach cares about people's freedom to do and to be as they have reason to value, and the level of wellbeing that they will reach when choosing from the options open to them.

For many years the reigning model to estimate development was the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, measuring average economic growth. While economic growth might be pointing in the right direction when we consider overall development, it is a crude indicator of individual development, since it does not look at the distribution of that growth. Besides that, economic growth does not have a one on one relation with other variables crucial for human development, like health, education or political freedom. India, for example, has a dramatically lower GDP than China, yet India's citizens enjoy political freedoms Chinese citizens do not have. This illustrates that assessing levels of development is a complex practice. Which dimension should be used in these exercises? Or should a range of dimensions be considered? And what is the minimum threshold for these dimensions to be met in a just society? Sen raised these questions in his, now famous, 1978 Tanner lecture *Equality of what?* In this lecture he opposed the dominant normative approaches, with the resource approaches on the one hand and the happiness and other utilitarian approaches on the other hand.

### *Sen's critique on resource approaches*

Resource approaches, egalitarian versions of the GDP approach, focus on equal (or equal enough) distribution among all citizens, as an indication for quality of life. Sen criticised these approaches, particularly John Rawls's theory of 'primary goods' in *A Theory of Justice*, as not being able to tell us enough about how people are really doing. While primary goods are just one element in Rawls' highly intricate account on justice, I will narrow Sen's critique down to its basics. Sen argued that, if all people would be the same, then equal amounts of resources would lead to the same benefits for all. However, since we are all different, we need different amounts of different kind of goods to reach the same level of wellbeing. Pregnant women for example need more, and more nutritious, food. Disabled people may need mobility support to move around society. And children in cities need areas to be appointed as playgrounds, while children living on the countryside do not. Equal distribution is not a good proxy for these or other goods. We will need to look at each of these resources on an individual level, rather than an equal distribution, to meet human diversity.

### *Sen's critique on utilitarian approaches*

The other strand of approaches Sen opposes concern utility, understood as the satisfaction of preferences. These approaches have the merits of caring about people, since it measures quality of life by looking at how people actually feel about their lives. While these approaches, with their focus on utility maximisation, measure either total or average utility, they initially are confronted with similar problems as the GDP approach. They do not take into account the distribution and aggregation of utilities. However, the issue of distribution can be dealt with if we install a social minimum, a certain threshold which must be met. The aggregation problem can be resolved by measuring utility over several dimensions.

A harder to refute objection to the utilitarian approaches is what Sen calls 'adaptive preferences'.<sup>7</sup> This objection deals with the social conditioning of preferences and satisfactions, which is vividly illustrated by Aesop's fable of *The Fox and the Grapes*.<sup>8</sup> In the fable the fox, driven by hunger, tries to reach some grapes on a vine, but as soon as he realises that he is unable to reach them he starts calling the grapes sour. People react similarly, when society has put things out of their reach because of their gender, race or class, they learn not to want the goods in the first place. It took a long time for European women in the 19th century, to overcome their socially manufactured prejudices against biking and realise its benefits and pleasures. These kinds of deeply internalised ideas, based on an unjust state of affairs, are what Sen believes to be a major problem with utilitarian approaches, even for those sophisticated forms of utilitarianism, known as welfarist views, that in some way acknowledge these deformed preferences.<sup>9</sup>

Another major objection to utilitarianism is that it undervalues freedom, since its goal is satisfaction of preferences. Utilitarianism can value freedom as a means to satisfaction, but where generally people are believed to prefer a life of choice and activity, even knowing in advance that some activities might lead to frustration, freedom is, apart from being a mere means, valuable in itself. A forceful argument, refuting pleasure as the only contributor to wellbeing, is Robert Nozick's thought experiment 'The Experience Machine' in his 1974 book *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. In this argument against hedonism,<sup>10</sup> people get hooked-up to an experience machine. These people have the illusion that they are eating, praying or loving, and they experience the satisfaction associated with these activities without ever having performed them. Nozick believes that if pleasure were the only intrinsic value, everyone would choose the experience machine, where their satisfaction is guaranteed, over reality. However, he claims that most would not. That people prefer a life of choice and agency. This endorses the understanding that people value freedom as a goal, something the utilitarian position does not.

#### *The capability approach*

Sen argued that freedom and a person's own values are essential in assessing quality of life and, since these were not met by the mentioned approaches, that capabilities provided a better benchmark. Sen describes capabilities as:

"... the freedom(s) to achieve valuable human functionings, which can vary from such elementary things as being well-nourished and avoiding escapable morbidity and mortality, to such complex achievements as having self-respect, being well-integrated in society, and so on. Capabilities thus reflect the actual freedom that people respectively enjoy in being able to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 62

<sup>8</sup> Elster, Jon (1982), *Sour grapes - Utilitarianism and the Genesis of Wants*

<sup>9</sup> For an account opposing welfarist views see 'Informed-Desire Welfarism' in Nussbaum (2010), *Creating Capabilities*, p. 81-84

<sup>10</sup> The primary thesis of hedonism that 'pleasure is the good' is held by utilitarians. Note that the term hedonism (pursuit for pleasure) has a different meaning than its more general, informal use, being an excessive pursuit for pleasure.

<sup>11</sup> Sen (1990), *Welfare, Freedom and Social Choice: A Reply*, p. 460

So instead of focussing on resources or utility, the capability approach emphasises the process whereby people flourish: their capabilities and functionings. Capabilities capture what people are able to do and to be and functionings point to the actually achieved beings and doings. As such the capability approach values freedom in its own right, and addresses the critique on the utilitarian approaches as not valuing freedom as a goal. And by being concerned not just about what people value, but what they have reason to value, it handles the critique on utilitarianism regarding adaptive preferences. This means that, in the foregoing example of 19th century women, socially conditioned in their view towards biking, the capability approach takes into account the loss of benefits and pleasure of biking in the overall wellbeing of these women, as they have reason to value this. The critique on resource approaches, as not accounting for human diversity, is also addressed by changing the focus to capabilities. Where personal and social differences between people affect the transformation of resources into capabilities, looking at capabilities will be a better proxy for wellbeing. Here Sen also addresses his concern about equality, as it is not resources (as in Rawls' primary goods), but capabilities that should be made equal, in order to create a just society.<sup>12</sup>

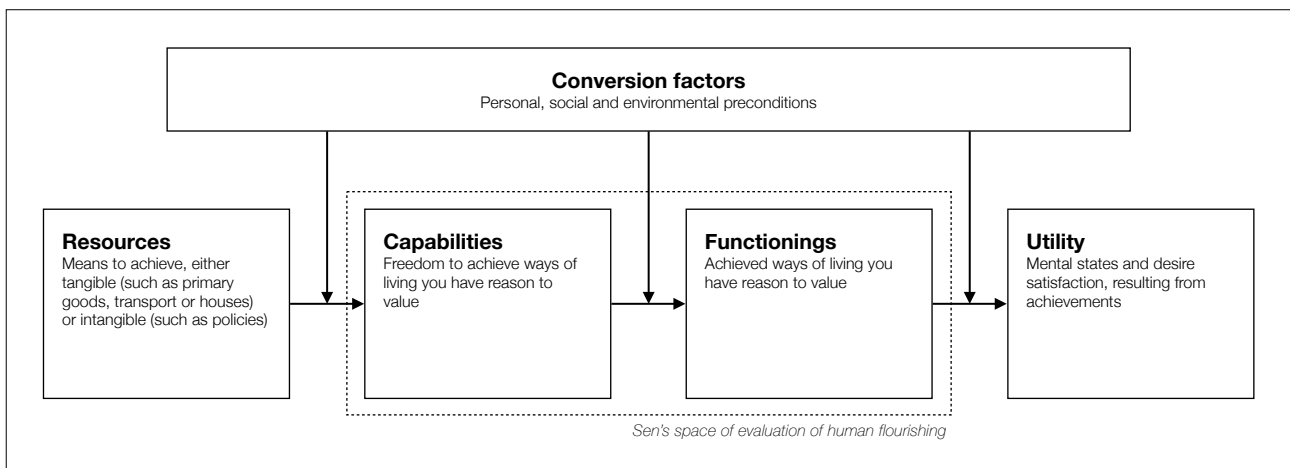


Figure 1 - The Capability Framework

In the capability framework in figure 1, the relation between resources, capabilities, functionings and utility is schematically shown.<sup>13</sup> Where a resource has certain characteristics to make it valuable to people, it is these characteristics that enable capabilities, which when effectuated make it achieved functionings, and after people's valuation determine their degree of satisfaction (utility).<sup>14</sup> These relations are influenced by, what Ingrid Robeyns calls, conversion factors.<sup>15</sup> She distinguishes three groups of conversion factors: personal

<sup>12</sup> The underlying normative ethics of the capability approach is not very clear-cut, as it does not fit squarely in one of the three major ethical positions, that is, consequentialism, Kantian deontology and Aristotelean virtue ethics. The capability approach incorporates elements of all three theories, it is consequentialist in the way it can value functionings, and Sen's and Nussbaum's concern with equality and human dignity clearly have Kantian roots, whereas their concern with human flourishing and attention to individual context derives from Aristotle.

<sup>13</sup> This scheme is an adjusted and simplified version of Robeyns' schematic representation of how the conversion of goods and services into functionings take place (Robeyns (2017), *The Capability Approach, An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, p. 69)

<sup>14</sup> Des Gasper argues that Sen seems to propose a priority ranking in these. Where capabilities obviously have the highest priority, the complete range, from high to low priority is: capabilities, functionings, utilities, resources (Gasper (2002), *Is Sen's Capability Approach an Adequate Basis for Considering Human Development*, p. 6)

<sup>15</sup> Robeyns (2005), *The Capability Approach, An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, p. 39-41



(e.g. physical condition, skills), social (e.g. policies, norms) and environmental (e.g. climate, geographical location and, important for our discussion, spatial environment). Conversion factors play a role in establishing capabilities (a bike, as a resource, and the appropriate infrastructure, as a conversion factor, enhances the capability of mobility), in the execution of capabilities into achieved functioning (the capability of mobility in terms of biking is not a viable option if biking is restricted because of social norms) and in the final satisfaction of that functioning (as biking might be regarded as unpleasant as it is generally out of reach). Hence, knowing people's resources or the ones they have access to, is not sufficient to know which capabilities and functionings they can achieve. We also need to know people's circumstances. And as obvious as a connection between spatial environments and capabilities may seem, philosophers working on the capability approach so far do not seem to have sufficiently realised the potential of spatial environments for capability expansion. It is not on Robeyns' list of important inputs for capabilities (as are financial resources, social and political institutions, habits and others)<sup>16</sup> and there is, as yet, little literature on the subject.<sup>17</sup>

Spatial environments matter to capabilities and functionings, either as a resource, enabling capabilities, or as a conversion factor, reducing or expanding these capabilities. A public square as a resource can provide the capability of affiliation if it is inviting to people, while available trees (providing lee and shade) and seating arrangements can expand the conversion for this particular capability. While this example may be clear, the effect of spatial environments on capabilities are sometimes less straightforward. A specific spatial environment may expand the capabilities for a certain group of individuals, while simultaneously diminishing it for another, or influences one capability positively and another negatively, or has positive impacts on the short term and negative impact on the long term. Skeptics might therefore wonder if a focus on the design of spatial environments for the expansion of capabilities is not just a very nice idea, but impossible to put into practice. However, the fact that spatial environments are able to influence capabilities seems undeniable. To what degree, is something we cannot resolve in the span of this thesis and may be an object of further study.

A few things need to be said about the use of capabilities versus functionings in an evaluative context. We have seen that, according to Sen, capabilities and functionings form the better evaluative space, although this leaves the question unanswered whether we should focus on capabilities or functionings, the effectively possible or the realised. To use an example of Sen's,<sup>18</sup> a person who is starving and a person who is fasting have the same functioning, both are malnourished, but they do not have the same capability. Where the fasting person is able not to fast, the starving person has no choice.

Functionings give capabilities an endpoint, but capabilities are valuable in themselves as a space of freedom and choice. Promoting capabilities is to promote areas of freedom, which is not the same as making people function in a certain way. It is the liberal nature of the capability approach, or its anti-paternalist commitment, that motivates a choice for capabilities. This does not mean that functionings have no place in the capability

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<sup>16</sup> Robeyns (2005), *The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey*, p. 96

<sup>17</sup> The currently available literature on spatial environments and capabilities remain either on an abstract level with new proposals of alternative frameworks where the spatial fits in, which might be hard to grasp for practitioners (Frediani and Hansen, 2015), or propose well-intentioned concrete tools (Marc Steen's Capability Card set) in which the thinking has already been done, which seems hardly the way to go for an approach that emphasises human diversity (Steen, 2016)

<sup>18</sup> Sen (1985), *Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom*, p. 201

approach. A society with people that have lots of capabilities, yet would never function, can hardly be regarded as a flourishing society. Moreover, sometimes there are reasons where it makes sense to only look at people's functionings. This is the case when people lack the capacity to choose from their capabilities, such as children, those severely mentally disabled, and very old people. In valuing capabilities over functionings, we assume the presence of a sufficient level of agency, so people can make their own choices from their capabilities. If people lack such agency, we should not let them decide, but have to find ways to compensate them. When this is the case, it makes sense to shift our normative concern from capabilities to functionings, and look at what people have been able to realise, that is their achieved functionings. Robeyns argues that this claim is not limited to people who lack the capacity to choose. You could apply this argument to all adults, since everyone sometimes makes "systematically irrational or mistaken choices"<sup>19</sup> and harm their own interests. As such there are good reasons to sometimes focus on functionings, sometimes on capabilities, and sometimes on a mixture of the two. For the course of this evaluation I will regard people as responsible agents, capable of making their own choices, as I will try to determine in what way spatial environments contribute to the expansion of people's freedom to be and to do as they have reason to value. As such I will evaluate spatial environments in terms of their capability impacts.

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<sup>19</sup> Robeyns (2017), *The Capability Approach, An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, p. 93

### 3. Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom

In the previous chapter we have seen that not resources or utility, but capabilities and functionings provide the better evaluative space for matters regarding wellbeing. While a person's wellbeing is an important aspect of human flourishing, Sen observes that it is not unique in this respect. He claims that agency is an equally important aspect of a flourishing life. Other philosophers refrain from integrating the notion of agency in the capability approach, but as we shall see in chapter 5, this dichotomy sheds an interesting light on the evaluation in this thesis.

In his 1985 Dewey lecture *Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom*, Sen names capabilities 'wellbeing freedom' and functionings 'wellbeing achievements', as they both constitute to the wellbeing aspect of a person. This makes sense, as we have seen in the example of the fasting and starving persons. There is no difference in their actual achieved wellbeing levels, it is the opportunity to choose for the fasting person, which raises his level of wellbeing freedom over the wellbeing freedom of the starving person.

In the last section of the previous chapter we have noted that the wellbeing aspect of an autonomous person needs an agency aspect. By valuing capabilities over functionings, or wellbeing freedom over wellbeing achievements, we have argued that a sufficient level of agency is necessary in order to make a responsible choice. Sen conceives wellbeing and agency as two interdependent and equally important aspects of human life, which should be taken into account in our understanding of how people are doing.<sup>20</sup>

The term 'agency', like the term 'capability' can be confusing as there is no straightforward definition, and in some languages it has no proper translation, such as Dutch. Sen understands agency as "a person's ability to pursue and realise goals that he or she values and has reason to value."<sup>21</sup> He claims that people should be free in exercising their agency and as such shape their own specific view of the good life. Sen divides the agency aspect of a person, like the wellbeing aspect, into freedom and achievements. He argues that "a person's agency freedom refers to what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important" and that it "cannot be understood without taking note of his or her aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations, and - in a broad sense - the person's conception of the good".<sup>22</sup> In this sense it differs from wellbeing freedom as this is to be understood as the freedom to achieve something in particular, namely wellbeing. So, according to Sen, agency freedom is freedom to achieve whatever a person, as a responsible agent, decides to achieve, even if this is not attributing to a person's wellbeing. This so-called 'open conditionality' differs from the goal oriented wellbeing freedom.

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<sup>20</sup> Sen (1985), *Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom*, p. 203 and Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 189-191

<sup>21</sup> Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 19

<sup>22</sup> Sen (1985), *Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom*, p. 203

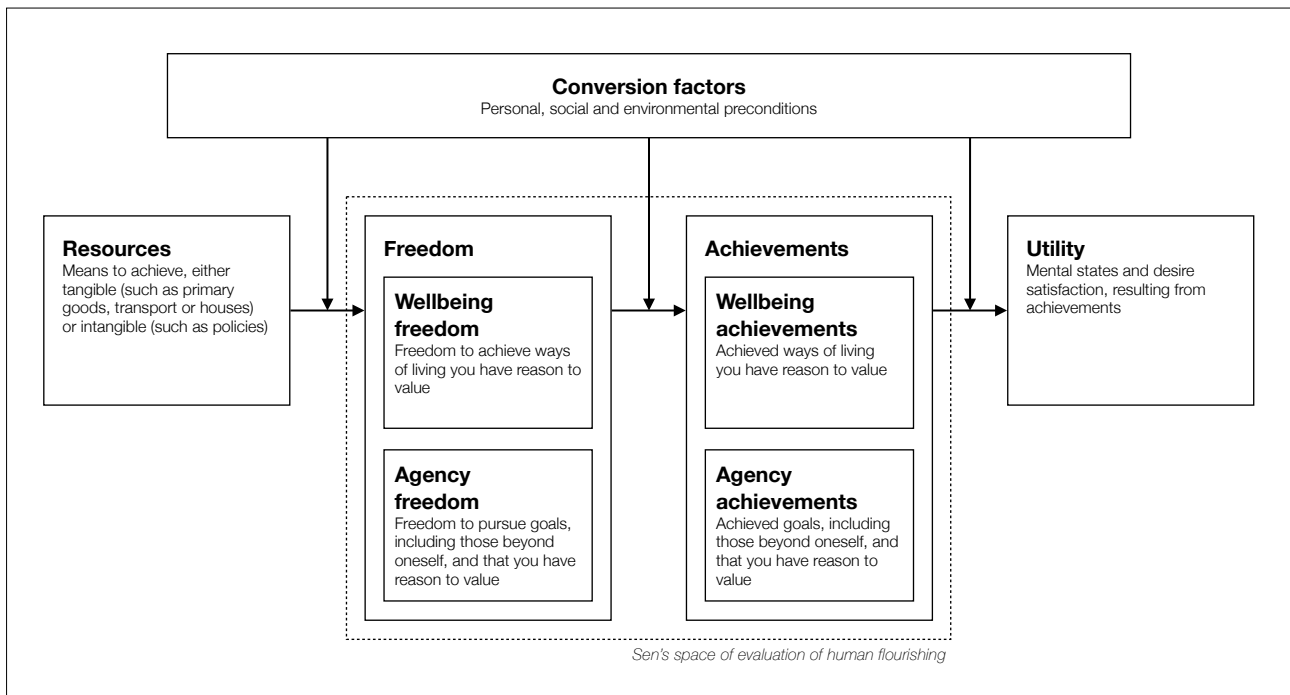


Figure 2 - The Capability Framework, expanded

As such Sen's evaluative space of human flourishing is defined by two core features of a person's life: wellbeing and agency, which both feature a freedom and an achievement component (see figure 02). This might best be illustrated if we elaborate on the situation of the previously addressed fasting person.<sup>23</sup> As we have seen, his choice to fast is not constitutive to his wellbeing achievement, since a choice not to fast and enjoy his meals would certainly raise his level of achieved wellbeing, and as such his overall wellbeing. So fasting would be considered as not a responsible choice, if we would only address value to wellbeing. If we now assume that the fasting person holds a firm idealistic belief that his fasting will benefit others, who would not be benefitted if he would not be fasting.<sup>24</sup> By choosing to fast, the person makes good use of his agency freedom, but at the same time reduces his wellbeing achievements by his choice not to eat. He may of course enjoy benefitting others, and part of his wellbeing may surely be positively influenced by that, but I believe his wellbeing to be considerably lower, with his regular meals being replaced by hunger and misery. By expanding his agency freedom (as to allow for the freedom to fast) and his agency achievements (by benefitting other people), he reduces his wellbeing by his own choice. I believe this to be a convincing argument in claiming that there are "goals other than wellbeing, and values other than goals".<sup>25</sup> As such I will support Sen's claim, that a flourishing life needs a conception of freedom, broader than the freedom to pursue your own wellbeing.

<sup>23</sup> See for another example, which illustrates these two types of freedom Sen's "drowning man" (Sen (1985), *Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom*, p. 206-207)

<sup>24</sup> This is the case in many religious doctrines, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, where a tradition of fasting exists in order to, among others, focus on the plight of those who involuntary go without food throughout the year. A similar argumentation can be held for people on a hunger strike for a greater cause.

<sup>25</sup> Sen (1985), *Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom*, p.186

### *Nussbaum's critique*

Whether the capability approach should always and for all purposes entail an explicit commitment to agency is disputed. Martha Nussbaum, who together with Sen built the foundations of the capability approach, specifically refrains from integrating the notion of agency in her capability theory.<sup>26</sup> In a special appendix on the subject in *Creating Capabilities*,<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum rejects the distinction between wellbeing freedom and agency freedom. Her central argument holds that Sen, in rejecting utilitarian and welfare conceptions of wellbeing as being too narrow (which Nussbaum endorses),<sup>28</sup> uses a wider conception of wellbeing, which should make Sen's notion of agency (freedom) redundant. She acknowledges some account of agency in her theory, but she frames it without using the word. Nussbaum claims that "agency is woven throughout"<sup>29</sup> her capability based conception of wellbeing, and although she does not give a sufficiently refined description of that conception, she concludes that there is no need for a distinction.

I disagree with Nussbaum on two grounds. Firstly I argue that there are altruistic conceptions of the good, which do not constitute to, and even may reduce, wellbeing. As such we need a broader conception than simply individual wellbeing to constitute a flourishing life. The second ground to stick to Sen's dichotomy is that wellbeing and agency perform different roles, where wellbeing freedom is concerned with the freedom to choose from valuable, available options, agency freedom is concerned with the freedom to shape your own version of the good life. I will elaborate on both grounds.

As we have seen, Sen's wider conception of wellbeing does not include everything a person attributes value to. Nussbaum claims that wellbeing freedom is directed to "whatever a person values, that is, with that person's conception of the good"<sup>30</sup>. She argues that as soon as people value something, the opportunity to choose the corresponding functioning will be relevant to both their agency freedom and their wellbeing freedom, which makes a distinction between the two useless. Nussbaum has a point, since we said that by looking at the fasting man in the example, part of his wellbeing may surely be "positively influenced" by believing that his fasting benefits others. Nussbaum must be convinced that this added wellbeing has to outweigh the loss of wellbeing by his suffering from hunger, because he otherwise simply would not be fasting. Sen disagrees, as he claims that we can value agency for its own sake. A decrease of a person's wellbeing aspect can be met by an increase of a person's agency aspect, and as such contribute to that person's flourishing. Nussbaum's claim, that agency holds no intrinsic value, can be refuted when we move to a similar altruistic situation, regarding matters of life and death. People can pursue goals that may end their lives (fighting for one's country), where it might be hard to believe that they think it would promote their

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<sup>26</sup> Robeyns (2017), *The Capability Approach, An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, p. 55

<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum (2010), *Creating Capabilities*, Appendix B "Sen on Wellbeing and Agency", p. 197-201.

<sup>28</sup> The "narrow" utilitarian conception of wellbeing, connected to happiness or desire satisfaction, is regarded by Sen as insufficient as it cannot capture freedom as an end (see Nussbaum (2010), *Creating Capabilities*, chapter 2, Utilitarian Approaches).

<sup>29</sup> Nussbaum (2010), *Creating Capabilities*, p.201

<sup>30</sup> Nussbaum (2010), *Creating Capabilities*, p.199

wellbeing. We either have to attribute irresponsible agency to them or conclude that there must be goals, other than wellbeing. The freedom to attain these goals is outside the realm of wellbeing freedom. While not all people, jeopardising their lives for a greater cause, will have the same level of responsible agency, we can say that we need a conception wider than wellbeing which accounts, together with wellbeing, for a flourishing life or a 'life well lived'. Whether altruistic principles are just taken to be part of flourishing or also to wellbeing, as Nussbaum suggests, is a matter of definition. The fact that not all human activity contributes to wellbeing, no matter how broadly we define it, supports Sen. He regards human flourishing as transcending a focus on wellbeing alone, and that by viewing people as agents, a flourishing life is composed of both dimensions, each of which have intrinsic importance.

The concern may arise that agency freedom, since it is regarded as a broader account of wellbeing freedom or "freedom tout court,"<sup>31</sup> could subsume wellbeing freedom. After all, since we defined agency freedom as including all a person's pursuits and choices, the pursuit for wellbeing would just be part of that. This leads us to a second ground for rejecting Nussbaum's critique. It is important to recognise that both, agency and wellbeing, matter to people in different ways. The wellbeing aspect of a person is important in assessing a person's advantage, a person seen as a 'beneficiary'. The agency aspect of a person is important in assessing what a person can do in line with his conception of the good, the same person, but now seen as a 'doer and a judge'. Sen defines an agent as "someone who acts and brings about change",<sup>32</sup> the opposite of an agent is someone who is forced, oppressed, or passive: a patient. So the freedom of will and the action to realise either wellbeing or non-wellbeing goals is crucial for agency freedom. This appeals to what Rawls calls a "considered judgement" that, "all things considered it is better to act than to be acted upon, either as someone else's tool or a pawn of circumstance"<sup>33</sup>, or as Isaiah Berlin captures this:

"I wish to be the instrument of my own, not other men's acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object ... I wish to be a somebody, not a nobody, a doer - deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted on by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them."<sup>34</sup>

#### *Dimensions of agency*

Before addressing what spatial demands wellbeing and agency freedom require in order to expand, it is helpful to look a little further into Sen's understanding of the concept of agency. We have seen that Sen understands an agent as "someone who acts and brings about change" and "whose achievements can be judged in terms of his own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external

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<sup>31</sup> Sen (1985), *Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom*, p. 204

<sup>32</sup> Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 19

<sup>33</sup> Rawls (1971), *A Theory of Justice*; quoted in Crocker and Robeyns (2010), *Amartya Sen*, p. 83

<sup>34</sup> Berlin (1969), *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. 131; quoted in Crocker and Robeyns (2010), *Amartya Sen*, p. 83

criteria as well.”<sup>35</sup> Based on Sen’s writings, especially in *Development as Freedom*, Crocker and Robeyns made a rational construction of Sen’s dimensions of agency. They determine that a person is an agent with respect to action X, to the extent that the following four conditions hold: self-determination, reason-orientation, action and impact on the world.<sup>36</sup> These are not necessary conditions, as in that they should all be met before we can speak of agency. Crocker and Robeyns argue that the more fully an agent’s actions fulfils these conditions, the more fully is that act one of agency. They claim that agency is a matter of degree, rather than a binary condition. I elaborate briefly on these four dimensions:

‘Self-determination’ holds that an agent has not exercised agency unless he decides to act himself. When his actions are caused by external circumstances or internal compulsions or when he is forced, he does not exercise agency, even though he gets what he wants. Even if he is forced to do what he would have chosen anyway, Sen speaks of a violation of (agency) freedom.

‘Reason-orientation’ means that a person realises agency when he acts on purpose for a purpose. Not just any action is an agency achievement, acting on whim or impulse is not exercising your agency. An agent’s decision is for some reason, or to achieve some goal, regardless whether that goal is self-regarding or other-regarding.

‘Action’ is the central element in Sen’s understanding of agency. If someone decides on the basis of good reasons and by his own choice to act and either take no action or fails to realise his goals, he lacks full agency. And as we have seen, even though the agent gets what he planned for, if he did not perform the action himself, he is not regarded an agent.

And finally, the more an agent’s action makes ‘impact on the world’, the more fully does the agent exercise agency. So one’s exercise of agency is not just a doing with an intention, but the action must make a difference. Only when an agent intentionally achieves his goal, is he regarded an agent. To change the world, requires that an agent has agency freedom: “Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters (the agency aspect of the individual) are central to the process of development”.<sup>37</sup>

So a person’s life is not just regarded as flourishing if the proper wellbeing freedom and wellbeing achievements are in place, it is also important who decides this, on what basis and if you are able to act to effect change. This is what Crocker and Robeyns call the ‘agency oriented capability approach’.<sup>38</sup> We have reason to value agency and wellbeing for their own sake. Without agency freedom and achievement, without “the liberty of acting as citizens who matter and whose voices count” people risk a life as “well-fed,

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<sup>35</sup> Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 19

<sup>36</sup> Crocker & Robeyns (2010), *Amartya Sen*, p. 81-82

<sup>37</sup> Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 18

<sup>38</sup> Crocker and Robeyns (2010), *Amartya Sen*, p. 76

well-clothed, and well-entertained vassals”.<sup>39</sup> And without substantial wellbeing freedom and achievement, people are unable to realise their potential as agents. Where generally wellbeing achievement is the focus of concern, when discussing human flourishing, I have argued in line with Sen, that we also need to attach value to people’s agency achievement, and more crucially to people’s wellbeing freedom and agency freedom. The latter are most important in constituting to a flourishing life, where they perform different roles, pursue different goals and in order to expand, make different demands of the spatial environment.

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<sup>39</sup> Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 288. A horror scenario of this “well-fed, well-clothed, and well-entertained vassals” is beautifully pictured in the Pixar animation *Wall-E*, where people, suffering from morbid obesity, get around in floating trolleys with big screens, to be fed, clothed and entertained, without exercising their own free agency.



## 4. Challenges

In the context of the forthcoming evaluation of rural versus urban spatial environments, we have argued in the last chapter that the relevant space for evaluating quality of life is shaped by a person's wellbeing and agency. It was also argued that, since we regard the majority of people as responsible agents, the emphasis will be on the freedom dimension of both aspects (chapter 2). But surely not every valued freedom opportunity contributes equally to a flourishing life. Which are the substantive freedoms that matter most and should be regarded in our evaluation, and if these can be determined, how can these different freedoms be aggregated to get an overall idea of human flourishing in the different spatial environments?

### *Epistemological challenge*

In the epistemological debate about which (substantive) freedoms matter and who is to decide this, Sen holds an open position, whereas Nussbaum identified a list of 10 central capabilities which she believes are needed for a minimal flourishing life, in which people can properly exercise their agency. These are: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play and control over one's environment.<sup>40</sup> She claims that justice requires bringing every human being to a certain threshold for each of these capabilities. Although Sen gives plenty of examples of important capabilities in his work (he often mentions health and education), he has always refused to make such a list. He believes that a proper list of capabilities may depend on purpose and context, and should be a result of democratic deliberation, not something a theorist should come up with. His critique has been countered for not understanding the proper role of philosophy and the normative position of Nussbaum's proposal.<sup>41</sup> I believe Nussbaum's list of central capabilities needed for a minimal flourishing life, although debatable, offers a useful starting point for the evaluation in the next section.

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<sup>40</sup> Nussbaum's 10 central capabilities:

- 1) *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living,
- 2) *Bodily Health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter,
- 3) *Bodily Integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction,
- 4) *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain,
- 5) *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development),
- 6) *Practical Reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance),
- 7) *Affiliation*. a) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech) and b) Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species,
- 8) *Other Species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
- 9) *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
- 10) *Control over one's Environment*. From a political and material perspective (Nussbaum (2010), *Creating Capabilities*, p. 33-34)

<sup>41</sup> This has been argued for by Rutger Claassen in his article *Making Capability Lists: Philosophy versus Democracy (2011)*, in which he investigates the debate between the democratic solution (Sen) and a philosophical solution (Nussbaum) and shows that the democratic position must incorporate at least some philosophical theorising.

### *Aggregation challenge*

In addition to the epistemological challenge, an evaluation of spatial environments in a capability context will run into an aggregation problem. A spatial environment does not affect capabilities of just one person, but rather that of a range of people, and probably all in a different way. It will be difficult to not lose sight of the moral worth of each individual. Additionally there is the incommensurability of different capabilities. How can we make trade-offs between them, either in between people or groups, or inside a person or a group? Nussbaum's position to focus on a limited set of central capabilities with a minimum threshold is a way to cope with this aggregation challenge. By measuring over several dimensions we can bypass the incommensurability problem and in setting up a minimum level of each of the central capabilities, every individual is taken into account. The next problem will be how to determine this minimum level. While a minimum threshold will be essential in a context of great poverty, I will refrain from dealing with thresholds, as the discussed spatial environments are not subject to great poverty and it is also not the aim of this thesis. Throughout the course of the evaluation I will focus on either a reduction or an expansion of capabilities, in both rural and urban spatial contexts.

## 5. Evaluation

For the evaluation of freedoms in the transition from rural to urban, I will make use of ideal types to emphasise where the spatial environment matters as these freedoms reduce or expand. I draw from my own experience regarding a rural environment as I lived for some time in the Blue Quarter, a remote settlement in The Netherlands, consisting of a stretch of 15 houses along a dirt road. The Blue Quarter will be contrasted to the ideal type of a metropolis: the city of New York. Both physical spaces will be compared for three freedoms from Nussbaum's list of central capabilities, which I believe are subject to change. After highlighting the existing freedom in the rural situation, I point at the loss of this particular freedom in an urban setting and address in what way the urban spatial environment attributes to that loss. I end each section with a design case in the urban domain, which seem to address these losses.

### *Affiliation*

The first central capability to be discussed is the capability of affiliation. Nussbaum defined it as being able to live with and towards others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction and to be able to imagine the situation of another, after which she added a nondiscrimination precondition. In short it holds that people should have opportunities to connect with others. In the rural Blue Quarter, life was fundamentally collective. The open construction of the semi-detached houses gave way to engage with passers-by, and as such meeting your neighbours was a daily activity. This inclusive community used as their communal meeting place an area, centred around a big swing in the middle of the Quarter. It facilitated random gatherings and it was the place for the neighbourhood's social events. At those moments people brought their own seating arrangements, and these events eventually became to look like a musical chairs, as people moved together with their chair, from one place to another whenever the sun moved, the wind picked up or another audience was desired. Spatial conditions like an accessible meeting place and the ability to sit and choose your own arrangement, contributed in this rural settlement to an expansion of people's freedom in being able to connect with others.

It is these conditions that are hard to find in an urban environment like New York. Generally considered as places with a high density of people which should enable our social species to thrive, there is another side to this, as Olivia Laing renders in her book *The Lonely City*.<sup>42</sup> People in high rises lack direct contact with others beyond their housemates, and the cities public meeting grounds are scarce and for the majority of New Yorkers far away. And once you get to one of these public spaces, a most prominent feature is not adequately taken care of: the ability of people to sit and decide for themselves where. Sitting and seating arrangements are identified by sociologist William H. Whyte in his documentary *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*,<sup>43</sup> as the key to successful meeting grounds and as such for meeting people per se. In his revolutionary street life project, Whyte had been examining different urban spaces in New York, looking for crucial ingredients for successful urban spaces. He observed that public spaces in New York, like elsewhere, are equipped with 3-seater concrete benches, fixed to the ground and placed alone, or on an "architecturally sophisticated

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<sup>42</sup> Laing, Olivia (2017), *The Lonely City*, Picador, Hampshire (UK), loneliness in 2M+ cities is estimated between 25-30% (Sennett, *Building and Dwelling*, p.294)

<sup>43</sup> Whyte (1980), *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (documentary)

distance from each other.”<sup>44</sup> Meeting up on these benches entails that you either are restricted to a maximum of friends or that part of the party must stand. Getting to know strangers on these benches is very unlikely and definitely uncomfortable, as Whyte shows in some hilarious shots in his documentary.

Paley Park, a pocket park in Midtown Manhattan, addresses this issue. Often cited as one of the finest urban spaces in the United States,<sup>45</sup> Paley Park offers its visitors light and moveable mesh chairs, which give people options and flexibility in choosing where and how they want to organise themselves. Where the park itself acts as a resource to a capability of affiliation, the moveable chairs serve as a spatial conversion factor in expanding the freedom to connect with others.<sup>46</sup> These chairs add to the wellbeing freedom of its visitors, as they are able to choose from more options, compared to seating arrangements in other parks. Additionally, people’s agency freedom is expanded as they are able to act and determine themselves where and with which entourage they want to sit, as such shaping their own environment. The result is a park with chairs everywhere, much more chaotic than other urban spaces, equipped by architects with benches to punctuate the architectural picture. But it is a park that expands people’s wellbeing and agency freedom, very much like the way we have seen at the meeting place in the Blue Quarter. The fact that Paley Park is for decades one of the most popular parks in New York, might mean that there is something to learn here.

#### *Control over one’s environment*

The capability of control over one’s environment is divided by Nussbaum in controlling one’s political, and one’s material environment. We obviously discuss control over one’s material environment, which Nussbaum defines as to be able to own property and to execute the associated property rights.

Houses in the Blue Quarter were once all alike, semi-detached and surrounded on three sides with spacious gardens. These comfortable gardens made it possible to adjust the houses by add-ons and extensions, for housing relatives, storing cars and other uses. As such the Blue Quarter turned into an intricate fabric of houses with adjacent annexes, garages and sheds, adding value and a sense of belonging.

Adjustments like these are hard to imagine, living in an apartment of a New York’s high rise. Even in regular townhouses in districts around New York’s city centre, extensions will be nearly impossible, since the eventual gardens are small, city space scarce and building codes rigid. These conceivable limitations are generally taken for granted by urbanites, but Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena shed another light on the ability to control your own physical environment. He received worldwide praise<sup>47</sup> for his ‘half a house’, houses with only half of the first and second storeys walled in. While the first objective was to build a better quality housing for the same budget by leaving out parts of the building, these incomplete forms gave the inhabitants physical control over the open parts of their house. Aravena even configured these houses in such a way that, if desired, the first floor and storey’s could be independent dwellings, so they could be rented out or used by

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<sup>44</sup> Quote from Whyte (1980), *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (documentary)

<sup>45</sup> The Wayback Machine (2004), *The World’s Best and Worst Parks*, Project for Public Spaces, online at <https://www.pps.org/article/september2004bestworst>

<sup>46</sup> The freedom to choose not to connect is also regarded as an expansion of people’s freedom. While it might be hard to address this to a capability of affiliation, Whyte observes that most people sitting alone, are found in the most busy urban spaces.

<sup>47</sup> Alejandro Aravena was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2016 for, among others, his ‘half a good houses,’ this annual award is widely regarded as architecture’s greatest honour.

different generations in a family. As these incomplete forms were finished, extended and developed by their inhabitants, these series of half houses turned into a set of well-loved homes.

The design of these houses realised for its inhabitants the freedom to take control over, at least part, of the physical space they were living in. It worked in a way as we have seen in the Blue Quarter, although this time the add-ons were made within the existing space envelop of the house itself. While the opportunities adding to the level of wellbeing freedom and agency freedom for this capability might not reach the levels of the inhabitants in the Blue Quarter with their spacious gardens, it definitely expands their opportunities, choice and possible actions compared to inhabitants of regular houses in central New York.<sup>48</sup> Creating the incomplete, as Aravena did, contributes to the residents level of agency freedom, as they are able to shape their own environment. This could be either for their own purposes (wellbeing achievements), as in creating an additional indoor space or an outdoor covered terrace, or for altruistic purposes, creating a separate dwelling for homeless relatives (agency achievements).

### *Play*

The capability to play is defined by Nussbaum as being able to laugh, to play and to enjoy recreational activities. In the Blue Quarter this took place in the nearby nature reserve. Although illicitly, people in the Quarter could enjoy this playground of immense proportions, and for children this was a place without rules and regulations, a place where they were in charge themselves and could enjoy the freedom to follow their own curiosity.

Children in New York lack these opportunities as they live in the all designed environment of the city. Freedom of children in the urban spacial arena is restricted everywhere, as all the space in the city is assigned to either buildings, cars, pedestrians and so forth. The occasional playgrounds available are either dedicated to specific games (like the iconic basketball cages on West 4th Street or the baseball fields in Central park)<sup>49</sup> or equipped with the usual playground equipment, like seesaws, slides and swings, designed by adult designers and not very challenging to the freedom and creativity of children. Carl Theodor Sørensen, a Danish landscape architect, had been designing numerous playgrounds before he realised that children in general thought they were boring. He was thinking over concepts which did not suppress but unleashed the urge to play. “Understandable” wrote Sørensen “that children rather play on building sites and dumps.”<sup>50</sup> That is how he came to the idea of designing a playground without the usual objects, rules and safety measures, but a place where children were in control. In 1943, during the German occupation, his idea was tested in a suburb of Copenhagen, Emdrup. Sørensen created a place of 7000 square meter and just added broken cars, piles

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<sup>48</sup> Since Aravena’s “half houses” were build in suburbs in Chili, the critique might be that “half a house” might never be a real option in city centres. Dutch architectural office CB5 on the other hand, experimented with so-called “regiewoningen” in the city of Almere (The Netherlands). These were houses which people could arrange by themselves from different building blocks, and apartments where people were in control of the positioning of the facade, as such determining there indoor-outdoor space ratio (Gemeente Almere (2000), *Gewild wonen*, Spinhex, Amsterdam). Since a proper evaluation never took place, the success rate of this exercise is unknown.

<sup>49</sup> Important to note is that there is a crucial difference between game and play. Where game entails performance and is framed by rules, play is open and free, directed towards the development of self-determination, creativity and thinking out of the box. Where both will be captured by Nussbaum’s definition to play, the latter will contribute more to the development of children’s agency (Hart and Brando (2018), *A Capability Approach to Children’s Wellbeing, Agency and Participatory Rights*)

<sup>50</sup> Dighton, Robert, *The Context and Background of the First Adventure Playground*, online at [www.adventureplay.org.uk](http://www.adventureplay.org.uk), quoted in Bregman (2020), *Human Kind*, ch. 14

of used wood, bricks and old tyres. Children could built and demolish all they wanted with hammers, chisels and saws. They could climb trees, make fires, dig holes and build huts, or like Sørensen wrote later “they could realise their dreams and imagination.” The playground in Emdrup was an immediate succes and soon after the end of WW II the concept of the ‘adventure playgrounds’ arose in cities in other countries, where they are popular till this day.<sup>51</sup>

The loss of the capability to play is probably the best illustration of a loss of freedom when we move to an urban future. Cities don’t facilitate free play. They are master-planned, and so are its rare playgrounds; straitjackets of the fixed and the familiar. What it means to play is decided for by the playground’s architect, for reasons not known to its users, aiming to create, what Sen would call, “well-entertained vassals”.<sup>52</sup> Sørensen’s playground in Emdrup on the other hand, is in fact a copy of the free environment in which children of the Blue Quarter grow up and can fully exercise their agency.<sup>53</sup> Where the traditional playgrounds, equipped with the ready-made playground furniture, may realise predetermined wellbeing achievements, the adventure playgrounds provide endless possibilities for children to shape their own world, leaving the decision what it means to play to the children by expanding their agency freedom.

<b>Capabilities</b> Nussbaum’s Central Capabilities	<b>Rural environment</b> Blue Quarter	<b>Urban environment</b> New York	<b>Urban environment</b> Freedom sensitive cases
<b>Affiliation</b> Being able to live with and towards others in the way one values	The communal meeting ground is open to all inhabitants. During random gathering and social events people bring their own chairs to socialise.	Social meeting grounds are scarce, and provided with non-social pre-seating arrangements.	Paley Park’s moveable chairs give people the freedom to choose their own seating configuration.
<b>Control over ones environment</b> From a material perspective	The houses with spacious gardens, create possibilities to adapt to the residents needs and demands, by creating adjacent constructions.	City fabrics and city architecture, like New York’s, make it impossible for inhabitants to freely alter the spatial environment, when someone’s needs request adjustments.	Alexandro Aravena’s ‘half houses’ enable people to create the spaces, useful to them at that moment, ready to be altered when the situation changes.
<b>Play</b> Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities	People, and especially children use the nearby nature reserve as their playground, which lacks rules and regulation and as such open to their dreams and imagination.	City playgrounds are scarce and generally completely designed, either to a specific game or provided with standard playground furniture.	Carl Sørensen’s adventurous playgrounds provide children the freedom to follow their own curiosity.

Figure 3 - Evaluation overview

### Rural as Agency Oriented

What these examples, summarised in figure 3, show is that urban space is designed to realise wellbeing achievements. This is what we observe when we look at New York’s urban spaces, houses and playgrounds, as they provide pre-considered achievements to meet, to live and to play. We have seen that its rural counterparts are less predefined, as the residents themselves are in control in what it actually means to meet,

<sup>51</sup> Since the eighties of the last century there was a stagnation in the growth of the number of adventure playgrounds, as people questioned their safety and regarded them as being ugly. By now there is renewed interest in them, as there is lots of evidence that free, risky play is good for the physical and mental health of children (Bregman (2020), Human Kind, Chapter 14).

<sup>52</sup> Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 288.

<sup>53</sup> Hart and Brando argue that exercising agency is something that should be developed from a young age onwards (Hart and Brando (2018), *A Capability Approach to Children’s Wellbeing, Agency and Participatory Rights*)

to live and to play. People in rural environments decide for themselves what they regard as being valuable, on the basis of their own reasons and are able to act accordingly. In shaping and determining their own lives, and in selecting, weighing and trading-off capabilities and other normative (altruistic) considerations, people in rural environments are more free to exercise their agency, at least, as we have seen, for the capabilities as discussed. This level of freedom, in particularly agency freedom, is not seen in urban environments. We don't realise how incredible regulated cities are. Almost every space in a city is predetermined and ascribed a function. It is planning codes and building codes that shape the basics of the city, as they involve strict envelopes about height, bulk, massing and aspects to light.<sup>54</sup> Architects and urban designers address the remaining degrees of freedom. In contemporary urban design the vast amount of thinking and shaping has been done.

These observations do not entail that rural spatial environments outreach urban environments in providing people a flourishing life. Firstly we looked at just three capabilities from Nussbaum's list, which would only partly support a claim in this respect. Secondly, by choosing and aggregating capabilities in order to make an overall judgement, we run into the discussed problems of multidimensionality (epistemological problem) and incommensurability (aggregation problem).<sup>55</sup> And thirdly, as we argue along the agency oriented view of the capability approach, people might also value freedoms, not concerning their own wellbeing (capabilities). These agency freedoms are hard to define, due to their open conditionality, and even if we could define them, they run into the similar problems of multidimensionality and incommensurability, which makes a general claim, about which spatial environment provides the better life, even more complex. As this is an historic debate, which many philosophers<sup>56</sup> have struggled with, finding the answer to this question was not the goal of this exercise. The point I want to make is that there are valuable 'rural' freedoms considerably less present in urban environments, which mainly involve a loss of agency freedom, caused by the current way we design our cities. A better understanding of what it is that we lose, considering that our future is urban, might help us to create cities which may redress these losses.

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<sup>54</sup> Imrie and Street, *Regulating Design: The Practices of Architecture, Governance and Control*, p. 2507

<sup>55</sup> See chapter 4

<sup>56</sup> This debate can be seen to start with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Julie*, 1761 and *Emile*, 1762) and Henry David Thoreau (*Walden* (1854)) up to such thinkers as Ebenezer Howard (*Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, 1902), Bernard Skinner (*Walden Two*, 1948) and Murray Bookchin (the *Ecology of Freedom*, 1982).

## 6. An Alternative Approach to Urban Design

As we have seen in chapter two, the common approaches to assess human flourishing are focussed on the accumulation of material resources or people's mental states, as in people's satisfaction with life. No wonder that the current urban design practice focusses on either providing the right resources or, by assuming architects understand human nature, satisfying people's preferences. Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas claims in his renowned book, *Delirious New York*, that "the Metropolis strives to reach a mythical point where the world is completely fabricated by man, so that it absolutely coincides with his desires",<sup>57</sup> and fellow star-architect Bjarke Ingels introduces his concept of hedonic sustainability<sup>58</sup> as a sustainable way to support people in their pursuit for pleasure, by providing the right architecture. While urban design is in practice directed by a mixture of both resource and utility views, in which policy makers and project developers focus on resources and building codes and architects deal with people's preferences, both views face the critique we addressed before in chapter two.

Sen's capability approach counters this critique, by making freedom of choice and people's own values important. By introducing his thinking in examining the transition from rural to urban spatial environments, the idea that urbanisation is beneficial to people's flourishing is being nuanced. We have seen that certain freedoms, while present in rural environments, get reduced in the urban spatial environment. The urban design cases, discussed at the end of each section, show that it is possible to retain (part of) these freedoms, by an urban design which is sensitive towards these freedoms. Sen's perceived dichotomy of freedom made it possible to define that the difference in the evaluated cases is to a large extent caused by a loss in agency freedom. As wellbeing freedom, in this context, is concerned with spatial environments that offer valuable opportunities with regard to wellbeing, agency freedom is concerned with spaces that are open and free, as such leaving space for people to conceive their own self-regarding and other-regarding goals. That is what we noticed with something so small as being able to configure your own seating arrangement in Paley Park, to being the architect of your own living space (Aravena's half houses) or your own world (Sørensen's adventure playgrounds). It is spaces like these, that cities lack.

### *Capability Sensitive Design*

Ilse Oosterlaken took up the idea that, whereas designers are in general aiming for preference satisfaction,<sup>59</sup> a focus on people's freedom could broaden the view of designers. In her paper *Design for Development, A Capability Approach*, she argues for a design practice that is more sensitive to people's capabilities. While her paper was focussed on industrial design, her idea has relevance for the whole design discipline. One of the main merits of, what she calls, capability sensitive design is that it draws attention to the immense human diversity, not just in terms of what people value, but also in terms of the factors that influence the conversion from resources to capabilities, functionings and utility. Oosterlaken illustrates her concept with a design case

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<sup>57</sup> Koolhaas (1994), *Delirious New York*, p. 293

<sup>58</sup> Ingels (2009), *Yes is more: an archicomic on architectural evolution* and Ingels (2011), *Hedonistic Sustainability*

<sup>59</sup> Oosterlaken (2009), *Design for Development, A Capability Approach*, but also the aforementioned Koolhaas (1994), *Delirious New York* and Ingels (2011), *Hedonistic Sustainability*



on tricycles for disabled people in Ghana.<sup>60</sup> She argues that extensions on these tricycles could expand user's capabilities. Apart from facilitating a capability to move, these tricycles could be equipped with a storage facility in front. The users were now enabled to serve as street vendors and as such increasing their income, opportunities and self-respect, contributing to capabilities other than mobility. While Oosterlaken certainly has a point, that these adjusted tricycles expand its users capabilities, it can also be seen as pushing people into a certain functioning. The choice of every tricyclist to either become, or not to become a street vendor can hardly be considered an act of full self-determination and as such as respect towards people's agency. Oosterlaken used the tricycle example to show what design can do to add to people's wellbeing, by expanding their wellbeing freedom. As we have seen, people's flourishing depends on two aspects of human life, wellbeing and agency. For Oosterlaken's tricycle case, really addressing both, people's wellbeing and people's agency would be to equip the tricycle with more than one possibility to choose from, while a fuller understanding of the tricyclist's agency could mean to outfit the tricycle with several mounting options and a tool box, so its users would be free to conceive their own conceptions of the good. However, respect for people's agency does not mean that designers always need to respect each and every preference people have. The issue here at stake is that in designing what people prefer, the discussed problem of adaptive preferences<sup>61</sup> can arise, while looking beyond what people superficially seem to want and designing what the designer thinks necessary, might be considered an act of paternalism. It is hard to provide general guidelines how to handle these different concerns, although it is clear that by addressing intrinsic value to freedom as a whole, we need to add the notion of agency freedom to Oosterlaken's approach.

### *Freedom Sensitive Design*

A next question of course, is what a design philosophy, which is sensitive to both wellbeing freedom and agency freedom, would entail. Within the context of this thesis, wellbeing freedom on the one hand demands spatial environments that offer opportunities for people to pursue wellbeing, whereas agency freedom demands spaces that leave room for people to conceive their own goals in line with their conception of the good (the open conditionality of agency freedom). These contradictory demands of both equally important and interdependent<sup>62</sup> freedom aspects seem to merge in the discussed design cases in the evaluation. This is best illustrated in Aravena's design of his half houses. Where the resident's wellbeing is taken care of by providing a basic shelter, a roof and some walled-in space, his agency is respected in leaving half of the house open so he can take control himself of (part of) his own environment. By designing the necessary, people's basic wellbeing is taken care of, and by leaving designs incomplete and spaces open, people are able to fill in the blanks as they value. As we have noticed a similar mechanism in the rural spatial environment of the Blue Quarter, the rural could be a guide in identifying how these valuable human freedoms come about and in defining what these spaces could be like in the urban environment.

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<sup>60</sup> Oosterlaken (2009), *Design for Development, A Capability Approach*, p.99-100

<sup>61</sup> The social conditioning of preferences and satisfactions, p. 6

<sup>62</sup> Without agency (freedom) people would lead paternalistic lives and without a minimum level of wellbeing (freedom) people would not be able to execute their agency (Sen(1985), *Development as Freedom*, p. 190-192)

Apart from addressing both wellbeing and agency, the discussed design cases share another aspect: they may not always look great. Paley Park with its wild array of chairs, the cluttered facades of Aravena's half houses and the 'junkyard'<sup>63</sup> adventure playgrounds, are not displays of a neat and ordered city. But where we tend to discuss design in terms of form, aesthetics and usability, its first principle should concern its ethical implications, the way design is grounded in human flourishing. These cases show places where people are in control; where building commissions see mess and disorder, people see opportunities to shape and organise their own world.<sup>64</sup>

This idea coincides with renowned sociologist Richard Sennett's recent theory on open cities. In his book *Building and Dwelling*, Sennett tries to find ways to connect the built city (ville) with the lived city (cité), in a way like the argument in this paper tries to connect the urban environment with concepts like wellbeing and agency. Sennett sees this relation particularly reflected in public spaces. There are often tensions between the visions of the urban designers and the reality of every day life; the top-down standardisation and the bottom-up diversity (I recall the discussed seating arrangements concerning the capability of affiliation). It is Sennett's aim to "find ways to engage the gap between the built and the lived"<sup>65</sup>; to connect the built environment with the way people dwell in it. He believes that current built environments are 'closed', meaning over-determined, segregated and controlled and argues for a more 'open' way of thinking and working on cities. Open meaning incomplete, uncertain and organic. Sennett composed a number of critical ingredients of open cities,<sup>66</sup> of which the most characteristic is the idea of the incomplete, which is a prominent feature of the aforementioned examples. Can a form be incomplete by design and can residents be their own (partial) architect? Sennett believes so and renders urbanism's problem as "a self-destructive emphasis on control and order"<sup>67</sup>. He also believes that we should attribute high value to the agency of its users, and emphasise that we don't build for eternity, that we can adjust and repair things and try to plan as little as possible: "minimal planning leaves room for maximum variation and innovation, allowing a certain amount of chaos."<sup>68</sup> I believe this could be a proper start in defining freedom sensitive design as a practice.

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<sup>63</sup> The adventure playgrounds were originally called 'junkyard playgrounds', a name which was transformed due to marketing reasons, when the concept was first exported to the United Kingdom.

<sup>64</sup> In this, Andy Dong argues that from a justice perspective, we should pay attention to people's capabilities to design themselves and as such enable them to co-shape their own world (Dong (2008), *The Policy of Design*)

<sup>65</sup> Sennett (2018), *Building and Dwelling*, p. 65

<sup>66</sup> Sennett describes five open forms to make a city more complex. These are (besides the mentioned 'incomplete forms'):  
'Synchronous spaces'; spaces for multiple use, like the agora in ancient Greece,  
'Punctuated places'; diversity in city buildings,  
'Porous membranes'; permeable city borders,  
'Multiple, seed-planning'; basic planning, followed by 'organic growth',  
(Sennett (2018), *Building and Dwelling*, p. 205-241)

<sup>67</sup> Sennett (2018), *Building and Dwelling*, p. 302

<sup>68</sup> Sennett (2018), *Building and Dwelling*, p. 327

## 7. Conclusions

The covid-19 crisis is a current example that we are in need of urban environments which are sensitive towards freedom. Where densification is the norm in city centres, we now need sidewalks wider than necessary, parks bigger than the 9-square-meter-of-nature-per-capita-WHO-norm<sup>69</sup> and balconies more and bigger than building codes prescribe.

We need urban spaces that address people's freedom to be and to do as they have reason to value. While architects and urban designers are not solely in charge, their contribution is essential in urban development. We argued that where architects, like the aforementioned Koolhaas<sup>70</sup> and Ingels, generally aim at people's preference satisfaction, a focus on people's freedom is a better proxy for people's flourishing. In examining the current transition of people from rural to urban environments, we noticed a loss of 'rural' freedom in cities, due to the built environment. Sen's dichotomy of freedom made it possible to address this rural freedom and expose its difficulty. As both wellbeing freedom and agency freedom matter in creating spatial environments, their demands are antithetical. Where wellbeing freedom needs spatial options to choose from, agency freedom needs open space to shape. The capability approach does not give quick and easy answers on how to balance these different demands. But what the evaluation showed us was that rural spatial arrangements can be a guide towards designing freedom in an urban context. This has been exhibited by Paley Park in New York, Aravena's architecture in Chile and Sørensen's playground in Denmark, where the widening and enhancement of people's wellbeing freedom and in particular people's agency freedom promote people's flourishing. We have seen this idea endorsed from a sociological perspective by Sennett's theory on open cities, as he claims that the urban spatial environment should be incomplete, uncertain and organic.

Sen's capability perspective helps to expand views on factors that may contribute to human flourishing. Our discussion has put forward the contribution of the capability approach in the design of the urban spatial environment. Human flourishing, in terms of agency and wellbeing, can be enhanced by a freedom sensitive design of our urban environment, applied not just in what we design, but maybe more crucially, in what we choose not to design.

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<sup>69</sup> Sennett (2018), *Building and Dwelling*, p. 234

<sup>70</sup> Noteworthy in this: Koolhaas recently curated an exhibition in the Guggenheim, New York, named *Countryside, The Future* (2020), in which he calls humanity to action in order to 'rescue' the rural. He argues that, as people move to cities, the countryside is neglected and ignored. In Koolhaas' vision the countryside should be taken care of by men. This idea is contrary to what is been argued for in this thesis: instead of taking Koolhaas' urban skills to model the rural, it is rural environments which may guide us to design better cities.

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