Introduction
Thinking about the city and well-being is an enormous task. In our anthropocentric era we interpret the phenomena of cities and well-being in terms of the value they have for humans which we instrumentally or functionally calculate in terms of the services that natural systems or social institutions provide us. Consequently, it is usual to equate well-being with health or economic-material prosperity and to see cities as the locations in which we can optimize the net utility. Heidegger, however, provides an alternative, convincingly explaining how we can’t adequately understand (or act upon) any of the constituent dimensions, much less well-being itself, if we start from the taken-for-granted view. Rather, we need to think well-being in terms of World, which he understands as the dynamic gathering together and continuing to come forth of what he calls the fourfold of heavens and earth, immortals and mortals. Well-being would be the Well-being of World – its fruitful unfolding (rather than dissipation or decay).

To frame the project within Martin Heidegger’s figure of the gathering of the fourfold might seem to create even more difficulties. But such is not the case because this approach provides both powerful theory and a way to interpret telling case material. The theory would recast well-being as an emergent state arising from the positive, generative dynamic of the gathering itself, which enables the flourishing of each of the mutually co-constitutive dimensions. Finally, those relationships enable individual and social well-being to occur and better explain the multi-dimensional sub-aspects such as basic material and economics for a good life, security, health, good social relations, and freedoms of choice, than can be done if they are seen separately much less if well-being is reduced to one or another of them. Surprisingly then, this no-longer-anthropomorphic approach provides a far more adequate account of human characteristics and needs, of our own journey toward and at least partial dwelling in well-being.

Here the city would be the great artifact which plays a dynamic role in precipitating the simultaneous gathering together of the fourfold that enables us to come into our own. That is, the city would be the historically realized place and means through which we might enact our individual and communal well-being as particular mode of belonging in the world. The phenomena of the city today, here and now, gives us more than enough to consider. Just as operating with an abstract theory without empirical content yields useless generalizations, trying to speak vaguely of “cities” is equally pointless. The task would be to begin the large communal project of undertaking many case studies to investigate the well-being of specific groups if not individuals in particular cities with their often contradictory forces, with their multiple layers from the past which, as Lefebvre observes, do not go away but bear on us today.
The project, then, is to better understand well-being and how it is enriched or impoverished in a particular city. This essay neither tries to prove anything, nor to generalize; rather it explores an approach that respects the singular. I employ the phenomenological process, working out how empirical description and fruitful theory co-constitute one another. This essay provides a case study describing Berlin, through which critical features of well-being emerge; when these are thematized they generate a pattern we recognize as Heidegger’s fourfold. At the same time, Heidegger’s view that historical-cultural worlds come about as the gathering of the fourfold – mortals, immortals, heavens, and earth – provides the framework for a convincing interpretation of the seemingly disparate urban phenomena.

Remembering that the process of presentation does not normally repeat the process of discovery, I give the three findings here, so as to make the multi-directional unfolding less confusing. First, distinctive features of well-being appear when we examine the way we live with others in community, respond to a spiritual impulse, participate in the rhythms of the heavens, and appreciate the elements and processes of the earth. Second, a more intense well-being can occur when, rather than some of the four dimensions manifesting themselves separately, all four appear as gathered together, resulting in coherent depth and richness of experience. Third, when, in cities, we live within and contribute to the gathering, which in turn feeds back to enrich our existential possibilities, our capacities can be most developed; the gathering provides the site where who you are or can become, what you do or might do, can unfold in multiple dimensions. That is, it is within the dynamic gathering of the fourfold into a concrete, historical world, such as happens in Berlin, that each of us is enabled to come most fully into “one’s own” – into the fullest well-being.

**Mortals**

Walter Ruttmann’s great film, *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, powerfully presents the restlessness, the dynamism, of the metropolis. The rhythm of machines, movement, money, people; machines, movement, money, people. Buildings and streets appear as the stable features against which trains, trolleys, automobiles, assembly lines, and deliveries show their movement; in which the poor beg, men fight, the bourgeoisie displays its affluence if not decadence, men and women manifest distinct and unequal sexualized behavior, the workers contrast with the powerful and ruling class in differences that hold even across races. The city generates its own atmosphere: machines, money, and people in constant motion.

Berlin has attracted and mixed multiple groups for a long time, groups behaving in heterogeneous ways toward each other across the range of violent hostility, exploitation, indifference, empathy, and cooperation. Its stable base consists of Germans and guestworkers attracted there because of the jobs available in Germany’s most industrial city, but then simultaneously subjected to the economic and psychological stresses, often desperate poverty, that characterize capitalized employment (as well as the conflicts that occur when different groups come together in a dense urban setting). Earlier successes in electrical and engineering processes were supplemented by machinery, chemical, metalwork, textile, and food production, as well as by banking, insurance, and legal sectors. Jason Lutes’s recent graphic novel, *Berlin: City of Stones*, picks up where Ruttmann’s film leaves off. At the turbulent moment of transition to the Weimar Republic a powerful train brings a student and other immigrants to Berlin, “a city in the modern sense” where “communists, socialists, nationalists, democrats, republicans, criminals, beggars [many crippled veterans], thieves, and everything in between, all mixed up together . . . into the flow of it as into a river through warring currents of flesh and smell.”

Berlin continued as the principle site of mobility after WWII when a shortage of labor not only drew Germans from all over the country but large numbers of Turks, as well as some Yugoslavians and Italians. As with other industrialized metropolises, housing was always inadequate, with workers typically living in vast blocks of *Mietskasernen* (large tenement blocks, some remaining from the 1860s and 1870, most from between 1880–1900, which often had additional dwelling buildings and light-industry facilities built in the interior spaces), usually in crowded rooms with no interior light and no plumbing facilities. Landlords, contractors, and speculators regularly extracted maximum profit and kept workers in harsh conditions.
To oversimplify, the tri-part population making up the bulk of the population (Germans doing adequately well as office workers, civil servants, shopkeepers, or restauranteurs; poor German workers; poor guestworkers) play out core characteristics long associated with cities: the city as the site of meeting and trade, of jobs and the prospect of a better life compared to rural poverty, and thus a magnet of hope. At the same time neither have large numbers of immigrants achieved prosperity nor have different classes and ethnic groups lived in happy intimacy. But for the last 70 years there has been at least a basic getting used to each other and working out ways to stay separate and to interact without unusual levels of violence. In terms of well-being these residents have tried to get what they basically need by leaving each other alone or becoming indifferent to each other, which seems to be realistic and generates a certain hardness as Richard Sennett appreciates about urban life, citing James Baldwin’s assessment of interracial relationships in the U.S., “people who can never understand one another, who are permanent strangers, can still live together,” though he also believes that “they need not be cut off in mutual indifference” – of which more later.6

Complementing the way many diverse groups often stay to themselves, they also regularly develop rich relationships, networks of resources, and small daily satisfactions within their own neighborhoods. With the city as a simple marketplace long gone, replaced by millions engaged in industrial production and consumption, professional and everyday services, with large disparities in enjoyment and suffering in a meshwork of complexly scattered and concentrated factories, housing (from mansions to tenements), offices, stores, and open and overcrowded spaces, Berlin actually is an agglomeration of neighborhoods with distinct characters, all of which constantly are under pressure to “make room” for yet other, new groups. Hence neighborhoods (Kietz), with taverns (Kneipen) for drinking and sociability, shops operating on a sub-economy with resident-specific goods and locally affordable prices are scenes of “making do.” Getting what one needs depends on the city being heterogeneous, not just in population but where goods and services can be accessed.

In fundamentally “anti-establishment” neighborhoods such as Kreuzberg, because of the poverty and relatively low costs of derelict housing, as well as the lack of power to be in control of itself, Turkish guest-workers were joined by members of other “marginal groups”: squatters, the unemployed, young men who could avoid the draft during the cold war by living in the isolated city, retirees, and numerous artists and bohemians who had more resources. This clustering does not mean that the more impoverished welcomed the latter groups with open arms but that while managing to get along, they all developed a certain solidarity. Though not at all constituting any coherent social structure they became politically active, advocating at the grass roots level for better housing, open spaces and parks, and an ecological way of building, especially through processes that promoted serious resident participation in the rehabilitation planning as exemplified in IBA (International Bauausstellung, International Building/Construction Exposition) of 1984–1987, where the strong local concerns contrasted with the goals of the official Berlin administration. Opposite the official city planners intent on a modernist urban renewal agenda and the Berlin Senate which wanted to develop density by significantly compromising allotment gardens and other open spaces, locally oriented residents supported IBAs’ official goal of a “livable city,” . . . “careful urban renewal without displacement” as headed by Hardt-Waltherr Hämer.

The local, self-sufficient dimension came to the fore in the way residents coped with the remaining environment of 19th century Mietskasernen, often unmaintained for five decades or longer and still regularly without adequate sanitary facilities. (Overall, the housing shortage remained unresolved, even though still larger developments had appeared on the edge of the city).7 By early 1980s there was substantial resistance, for instance by squatters’ daily practices, to the developers and landlords who routinely hired goons to break into and trash occupied apartments in run-down but rent-controlled buildings, ripping out the plumbing so that the owners could legally claim that the unit needed to be renovated, allowing the rent to be raised for the next tenant. In the political arena it was argued and demonstrated that it was socially and economically preferable to renovate dilapidated buildings, allowing the tenants who had already lived there for many years to remain, “retaining their accustomed environment and their social structure.”8
Activist architects and urban designers, students, artists, immigrants, and counter-culture residents energetically worked out details of how attractive buildings could be modulated by alternative, rather than mainline, modes of thinking and used to the end of a healthier environment and increased resident well-being. Professionally sophisticated community members opened up to and engaged with other residents to work out designs and building plans. Finally, in 1983, under pressure, the city authorities and Berlin House of Representatives adopted the Kreuzberg local authority’s “Twelve Principles for Urban Renewal,” after which thousands of participants conceptually developed the idea and built pilot projects.

Careful urban renewal is understood as planning in close relationship to the local situation with the aim of harmonizing the overall and individual conditions; decisions relating to the urban space and buildings must, in line with this concept, be linked to the social issues of day-to-day life – provision of affordable housing, preservation and management of jobs, provision of schools and nurseries, and co-ordination of developments in the urban structures.

...[It is possible] to create a basis to [sometimes] enable agreements to be reached between the property owners, tenants, redevelopment corporations, city and local authorities, architects and firms carrying out the work, users and residents’ pressure groups.9

The increasingly complex political agendas (which include push back against the government’s poorly planned and carried out post-war rebuilding and highways cut into the social and physical fabric) as well as the multi-faceted, diverse ecological movements bring to the fore nested dimensions crucial to well-being: adequate material and economic resources, social support, and the ability to make significant choices, which means more than a choice between two places to live, two versions of a product or food to buy, or two places to work or worship – though certainly minimally these. At a deeper level, it includes participation in the deliberative and decision-making processes operative in and on one’s life and the possibility of developing multiple dimensions of one’s self. Berlin does relatively well as a site to actualize the related underlying values though it still has significant limitations resulting from the structural factors of capital development and vested political power.

When the government was moved from Bonn the many ministries and offices along with the large connected network of foreign embassies and consulates, the support service providers of law firms, copy centers, and information technology consultants came en masse, all requiring housing and everything else. At first, when fewer international corporations located in the new Berlin than hoped for, they were coerced, pulled, and pushed by various means in an effort to obtain something like a critical mass that would continue on its own to self-organize economically, socially, and physically. This has happened as skilled professionals have come as residents or consultants in software development, marketing, advertising, and financial consulting. These groups add another dimension of richness to the population, but combined with the development of the new capitol complex and surrounding area including the new main train station have stimulated price increases and opportunities drawing international speculative capital while simultaneously displacing former residents. Within the latter group, the increasing competition, contrasts, and separations involve not only the core of poorer German workers and Turks, Yugoslavians, and Greeks who have been there for a longer time but, since the fall of the wall, the flood of immigrants from Poland, the former Soviet Republics. Not all of these groups appreciated one another as is seen in the initial and still persisting condescension of West Berliners to those coming from East Germany, with its long-internalized “communist” assumptions and expectations of state subsidization. While there is continued displacement in all real estate sectors, this unevenly impacts thousands of diverse residents given the especially notable conversion of modest central property to accommodate highly paid newcomers, including the international clientele wealthy and mobile enough to be able to choose to live in what are touted as the most desirable locations in the latest “hot” city.
In addition to such multiplicity as at least providing the possibility of material prosperity, access to some medical care and social services, there is the equally interesting complexity of the multiple dimensions which each person has and what Berlin – but not every city – offers.

There is a great variety of different places, each with distinctive affordances; further, these places can themselves have multiple uses, especially over the course of a day or week. Correspondingly each person has many aspects at any given time and certainly over the course of a day and lifetime. Multiplying these intersecting personal, spatial, and temporal factors Berlin generates a dizzying set of possibilities.

The variety of places with their offerings matters, but so does the temporal rhythm of availability and uses. Being able to try out or do different things during the course of a day, or a lifetime, depends on the spontaneous and planned features of a city. Spontaneous activities often occur as people find ways to utilize unused or under-utilized spaces: to practice climbing skills on the side of a high railroad viaduct, to have a quick game of handball against a building wall, a pickup football game in an empty field, setting up something to sell under an elevated highway or along a boulevard. Planned elements that play a crucial part include open and built spaces and infrastructure, for example the transportation system which though critical for many people going to and from work or distributing goods further enables individuals to get to the specialized places that as Jane Jacobs has pointed out can only be sustained in a large city with a big population: the rare coin or antiquities shop, the bookseller specializing in detective fiction, the store where toy soldiers are assembled into miniature tin armies to reenact historical battles, shops with an assortment of sexual paraphernalia, or where the society for creative anachronism meets. Or, open spaces are especially flexible for different uses over the course of the day so a platz that is a farmer’s market in the morning provides room for multiple impromptu ballgames in the afternoon and then the scene for outdoor beer drinking and hanging around at night.

Additional spatial-temporal multiplication occurs as residents shift routines and interests, patterns of behavior, in winter and summer or when an exceptional event presents itself. Many of us shift from what we do during the day to quite other nighttime activities. After a day of selling shoes you can skateboard on office plazas when they have closed for the day. Wearing long sleeves in the course of your day as an accountant in order to conceal your heavily tattooed arms, then changing into a ripped black tee shirt for a long late night in the club scene – much less into Berlin’s scenes of decadence – is in itself pleasurable and an exercise of freedoms of choice. In all of these activities we also witness how the city maximizes the ways people can pursue both desired activities and control the degree of social interactions they prefer, ranging from strongly being included in a group where they are known and accepted to strong anonymity with its freedoms. The city’s amazing range of places, potential activities, and varying temporal uses promotes the discovery and exercise of one’s multiple dimensions as complementary and enriching rather than problematic.

The realistic emphasis on the distance that diverse people in Berlin require and experience is only part of the phenomena. Many of the shared circumstances which lead to a more or less unspoken self-separating also provide occasions for finding solutions to common problems and for developing goals together – as mentioned above concerning generating local political engagement. This often extends into understanding one another, to empathy, whether for a co-worker’s health or the deprivation suffered by the least well off among us. Berlin is unusually socially sensitive, as seen in part by the amount of continuous spending to provide social services (if not warm personal embrace) through variations in available budget resources as well as by the attention to remembrance of harms past and actively seek reconciliations.

This capacity for community already was seen immediately after WWII when residents, seriously traumatized by the violence inflicted by the factions (including the occupational forces) on each other, nonetheless hoped in the possibility of a self-determined future if social unity could be restored. Thus, in designing his Philharmonic Hall as one of the first major civic projects to be undertaken, Hans Scharoun called on the trust Berliners have in the power of art, explicitly applying Heidegger’s thinking to the situation:

There is a need to find a way to serve and impact the collective effort; to facilitate cooperation – remember and put the arts at the peak of this effort in partnership with other areas of public
life… The task, after the question posed by M. Heidegger, is to consider the meaning or significance for art in our place in the middle [of the city and shattered nation].

The misery shared by everyone after the bombing of the city had a major impact on inter-personal relationships. During the wide-spread chronic disease and deep hunger, endured through four winters without coal for heating or lights, surely most residents were touched to some degree by a self-centered desperation, but just as surely many residents came to experience their mutual dependence, (though naturally the feelings dissipated over time and are not shared by the many who have since arrived). As for today, Werner Marx argues, in our pluralistic societies where we no longer have any shared values or justification for common practices the only real motivation for positive action would be compassion: we should promote feelings of compassion for other people in their lifeworlds, the motivation for which could arise from confronting our own mortality and realizing that we are not self-sufficient but depend on the support of others and our social constructions.

As the description of Berlin makes clear the diversity of different groups means that from any perspective there are others that don’t belong to my group, who may even be at odds with “us.” While friction among individuals and factions is a fundamental characteristic of urban dynamics, perhaps even necessary for its richness, this also entails that we are called on to help, to give part of what is needed for the well-being of others.

In terms of the well-being of a city’s diverse populations, as “outsiders” arrive their needs and wants depend not only on what they can do but on what is given to them, or at least offered as possible. For example, familiarity, empathy, and matter-of-fact re-assessment have led to a shift in the acceptance of guestworkers by the German government and Berliners. German citizenship had always been a matter of continuity of bloodline combined with residence, thus excluding a large number of people who wanted to be accepted as belonging, with citizens’ legal status. In 1999 the Federal Refugee Act allowed refugees, those who had lived in ethnic German settlements, and exiles to apply for citizenship. Yet another re-mixing of inhabitants and rights. That still left guestworkers on the outside, though many had families who had lived there for several generations. How to account for the shift? Many factors seem to have combined: explicit recognition of the increased acceptance that had gradually occurred, the continuous encounters with Turks and Yugoslavs who spoke fluent German and were fully acculturated because they had been born and raised there, a vague sense of “well, it’s time,” opening to the new spirit of globalization, and the need for more young people to pay into the retirement system which otherwise would run out of funds for the aging German population.

Other acceptances occur as the result of long advocacy by a minority constituency and an unexpected shift in public attitudes. Thus while Berlin has long been noted – even envied – for its tolerance of sexual license, finally the gay and lesbian communities, joined by many others, exuberantly celebrate a new openness in the Christopher Day Parades. Not at all any specter of moral corruption, their mode of living was recognized and incorporated as another viable pathway for individuals.

The poverty, hunger, cold, and exclusion – once to the point of horror as they unavoidably witnessed, perhaps supported, the deportation leading to the murder of over 60,000 of their Jewish co-inhabitants – variously shared over time, have sensitized Berlin’s residents to their finitude, to their fragility. The city has persisted in not turning a blind eye or forgetting, as is witnessed in the deliberately unrepaired bullet holes pocking buildings, in the high-profile monuments such as the Topology of Terror, Liebskinds’ Jewish Museum, or Eisenmann’s Holocaust Memorial (though they may be more focused on visitors from the rest of Germany or the world), or in the low-key locally experienced Grosse Hamburger Strasse Memorial sculpture of departing Jews (near the new synagogue) and in the many plaques on buildings and in street pavement marking the names of former occupants.

We arrive, then, through the diverse people of Berlin at an ordinary way of understanding that is the same as Heidegger’s more poetic articulation of humans as mortals – as those beings who are able to
appreciate their own finitude and anticipate their deaths, who are able to understand the importance of living carefully – caring – in moving toward their end. What more than humans and our concerns could matter in regard to well-being?

**Immortal**

Here Heidegger provides some guidance by speaking of mortals and immortals together, saying that to speak of one is to speak simultaneously of the other. How so? How in Berlin? Wim Wender’s wonderful film, *The Heavens over Berlin* (oddly translated as *Wings of Desire* in the English version) presents life in Berlin after WWII as observed by angels who first appear looking down from the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, itself in ruins, with neither any mention of God nor, as they say of themselves, of any power whatsoever to intercede in our troubled lives – lives depicted as far from well-being. The sick need to be tended, the psychologically distressed and the dying comforted, the forlorn and abandoned somehow brought in. Our mortality needs be faced, insisted upon. So what about immortals might matter? German gods, pagan or Christian, are all long absent. The helpless angels are able only to witness, to empathize without impact.

No longer looking for all-powerful gods or personifying them as ones who might answer their prayers, the Berliners may have an alternative: in times of desolation, where it certainly seemed that no god dwelt, they have responded by emphasizing the arts as an expression of spiritual impulse. In the troubled time between WWI and WWII a group of artists known as the Blue Riders (*Blau Ritter*) strove to delineate the yearning they and their fellow Germans were experiencing. For example, in his highly influential *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which articulated many of the foundational principles of modern art, Kandinsky contended that a spiritual revolution that only could be initiated by art was underway: “That which belongs to the spirit of the future can only be realized in feeling, and to this feeling the talent of the artist is the only road.” Once begun, however, such a spiritual atmosphere can belong not only to heroes but to any human being.

... Every man who steeps himself in the spiritual possibilities of art is a valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid which will someday reach heaven."

Such a project clearly is communal, and is even spoken of in terms of the connection of the human and the heavens, as an attempt to deny the material but to “harmonize the appeal of the material and the non-material,” an example of which striving Kandinsky found in Matisse, who “endeavors to reproduce the divine.” The master figure of these ideas combines the society of artists and ordinary people, actually making things, in a common movement from the material to the abstract and heavenly in a decidedly urban image:

*Humanity is living in ... a spiritual city, subject to sudden disturbances for which neither architects nor mathematicians have made allowance.*

Nor was Kandinsky alone in deploying this complex of ideas. Some 25 years later, after WWI and when Expressionism had given way to *Neue Sachlichkeit*’s commitment to matter of factness, the painter Max Beckmann, explained that he too was “seeking for the bridge which leads from the visible to the invisible” in a healthy facing up to the times:

*I feel the need to be in cities among my fellow men. This is where our place is. We must take part in the whole misery that is to come.*”

*Heavens over Berlin* continues the expression of Berliners’ impulse to spirituality in the face of the ruin of WWII. Wenders presents a scenario in which both the city’s inhabitants and the powerful angels work
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toward a sober, genuinely existential response to the situation. Importantly the film explores ways to find some positive dimension, without either lapsing into an illusion of a rural or small town utopia or ceasing to face up to human finitude while realistically hoping for well-being.

In taking up the problem of dealing with the urge to spirituality that motivated Kandinsky and his colleagues, Heavens over Berlin presents a possible resolution by moving in the opposite direction. Whereas artists in the early 20th century worked to delineate a pathway from the visible to the invisible, Wenders presents an inverse version, affirming the trajectory from the immortal and immaterial to finite embodied existence. Wenders achieves this by having some of the angels come to see the value of embodiment, which entails pleasurable as well as painful experiences. Early in the film, sitting in a BMW showroom, angels Damiel and Cassiel discuss how they wish they could be in the realm of embodied experience and to feel, rather than remain spirits. More and more comes to visibility under the angels’ eyes. Pushing itself forward, nothing other than the ordinary – what Heidegger calls “the splendor of the simple” – appears to Damiel; but, in Jean-Luc Marion’s terms, in showing itself, what gives itself begins to shine.

Overall, Wenders makes visible the pull exerted on Damiel through a double engagement: by way of the interaction initiated by a former angel, played by Peter Falk, who, even though not able to see Damiel, speaks straightforwardly to him, issuing an invitation, and by the powerful draft that the circus performer Marion exerts upon Damiel even though she can neither see him nor directly call him. The film shows how, in addition to all that is in the world, it is primarily a person who calls out to Damiel, not by addressing him or gazing at him, but by being herself.

One mediation occurs through the character Peter Falk, who lives between the two worlds: though now human, he was an angel and retains the ability to be aware of other angels even though now he no longer can see them. Through this conceit enacting an explicit interchange between the visible and invisible, Falk is able to specifically bid Damiel to come to mortality, to show us an explicit interchange between the visible and invisible. Falk is aware of Damiel’s presence and addresses him, extending a hand:

I wish I could see your face,
just look into your eyes and tell you how good it is to be here. Just to touch something!
Here, that's cold! That feels good!
Here, to smoke, have coffee. And if you do it together it's fantastic. Or to draw: you know, you take a pencil and you make a dark line, then you make a light line and together it's a good line. Of, when your hands are cold, you rub them together, you see, that's good, that feels good! There's so many good things! But you're not here – I'm here. I wish you were here. I wish you could talk to me. ’cause I'm a friend.

Campañero!18

Here the film intensifies the call of existence and of a now-mortal person. The call calls for response which, Wenders shows us, is evoked by the very character of the things and humans of this world – or, put another way, by “the world itself as psychoanalyst showing us soul, showing us how to be in it soulfully.” In the conversation that follows Damiel explains to Cassiel what has come to him and all the earthly things he intends to do now that he is ready to plunge into the flow of time – the history of the world – including what he has just now come to understand from what old men say, that from within time he must engage the moment of fear of time, of death.20

In a second, intertwined story, after watching the acrobat Marion and her circus colleagues complete a dress rehearsal (her costume complete with angel’s wings, foreshadowing their appropriateness for each other), Damiel reappears next to her in the following scene. Having just learned at the rehearsal that the circus has gone bankrupt, Marion faces the unhappy prospect of returning to being a waitress. She also is fearful about being up on the trapeze and breaking her neck, especially in her forthcoming final performance. She has retreated to her trailer, keenly aware of her condition, which predominantly is one of anxiety and
emptiness: “I feel nothing.”21 Yet, out of empathy love emerges. Damiel’s urge to comfort Marion turns to affection, passes through an erotic (questionably voyeuristic) phase, to the realization of love – an impulse strong enough for him to give up his angelic existence.

Damiel’s “crossing to embodied existence” occurs as an event in which he crashes into himself as well as being thrown to earth at the wall,22 after which he has the whole range of sensory experience: he feels a cut on his head, and, finding the blood discovers that it has a taste and is red (after which he happily asks a passerby to name colors for him). Subsequently he hears the clanking of the armor he carries under his arm as he walks to a pawnbroker’s shop (you need money in Berlin); he smells and tastes coffee and a cigarette.23 His entry into time is underscored by his proudly acquiring a watch. Now able to actually engage Marion at a dance club, the beginning of the actual mutual relationship is accomplished. The tension between the two realms remains however; indeed, with Cassiel still an angel the film highlights the power of existential possibilities in the project of coming into one’s own (which includes relationships to others and all there is on this earth).

Specifically presented by way of events in Berlin, the thoughtful, passionate choice for mortality rather than immortality reaffirms a much older story of decision and identity, as is underscored by the film’s device of naming the character embodying memory and a sense of Berlin’s history Homer. Damiel’s choice then echoes Odysseus’s where the latter declined the possibility of remaining on Circe’s island forever, enjoying being alive and the pleasures of Circe’s bed; instead he cast his lot as a mortal, continuing his trying journey home and heading toward dreaded death, all for the sake of being able to carry on living out his identity as a husband, father, and king – because only thus could he be who he really was.

The scope of a broad well-being opens up here. Not only a matter of adequate material-economic support and health in a narrow sense of absence of illness (since the acceptance of death brings the many hurts and diseases along with it), but in terms of one’s lifeworld. As we learn from the angels’ becoming mortal both individuality and openness are crucial aspects of our finitude and thus of genuine health. As philosophical anthropologists have convincingly argued, where health is understood properly in terms of our capacities to move ourselves or alter our world with a measure of control – without being incapacitated by disorders or diseases – it needs to be interpreted in terms of each unique individual, in terms of “the general equilibrium of the life in which [we are normally] active and able to be” ourselves, “involved in the world and being together with one’s fellow human beings, in active and rewarding engagement in one’s everyday tasks.”24 Thus, relieving the suffering of the patient at hand, even working to restore or maintain a patient’s normal condition (given the actual changing limitations of existential possibilities) refers to their particularity, not to a general category.25 Further, the variety of viable human lifeworlds is not accidentally related to our flexibility and resilience since the possibilities generated by our symbolic transformations eventually play out as the openness critical for our well-being.26

Especially in humans, health is precisely a certain latitude, a certain play in the norms of life and behavior. What characterizes health is a capacity to tolerate variations in norms. . . . Humans are truly healthy only when capable of several norms, when they are more than normal. The measure of health is a certain capacity to overcome organic crises and to establish a new physiological order, different from the old.27

Taking ourselves to be mortals in this way, accepting our lifeworld and life’s phases in terms of openness, mobility, and dwelling28 affirms that though there may be no gods (obviously) operative in one’s own place and time (though traditional believers would take another path, as would those in the new fundamentalisms) the immortals are always in play. They provide the measure; or, perhaps it is the unresolvable gap between immortals and mortals that does so. In having neither envy nor sadness at not being immortal, many people maturely, necessarily courageously, accept the fact and focus on their existential conditions so that the question becomes “How shall I move?” into and through my own mortality. Though each individual remains
such, we come into our own only when open to and given much by others and the earth, and even by the immortals and heavens insofar as their “possibilities” play a part in deliberate decisions. In reflecting on the way Berliners may exercise their mortality, by way of Heavens over Berlin’s depiction of angels looking down upon the earth and its history from the heavens we find ourselves in fact, as Heidegger said, speaking of mortals, immortals, heavens, and earth all at the same time. We find ourselves already in the midst of the dynamic gathering of the four which are all given together as World.

Heavens

Still, to speak concretely of the existential decision to reaffirm our lives on earth requires corresponding attention to the actual heavens over Berlin. How does the city stand in regard to the sky and its rhythms such that they directly bear on well-being? The historically important film already considered, Berlin: Symphony of a City, provides a clue. The powerfully presented urban dynamic of the city shows the striving and achievements, the technology and poetic dimensions so that through the vivid images of the diverse, often contending, groups, places, and activities with which we began this essay, we experience the rhythm of the city, the palpable movement through time, of time. As a giant agglomeration of activities, clearly never ceasing, always robustly pulsing and generating centrifugal force that propels itself along, Berlin shows itself as an enormous dynamo.

Berlin’s industrial and commercial force has achieved a technological velocity that dramatically removes it from any direct relationship to “natural” rhythms. Though factory workers’ hours now are shorter than the cruel 12–16 hour shifts of earlier times many people still work long hours, many work through the night not only delivering and replenishing stock, repairing the infrastructure, cleaning and maintaining buildings and open spaces, but coordinating their activities as stockbrokers, currency exchangers, and investors to constantly changing markets around the globe. These un-natural rhythms of the city which operate 24 hours a day all year around have effectively become independent from the patterns of the heavens, as Heidegger explains it:

the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year’s seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of the day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of the weather, the drifting of the clouds and the blue depth of the ether.29

With electrical lighting we are no longer bound to the sun’s orchestrating our waking and sleeping, or periods for work and rest. There is a loss of connection with the ancient patterns of behavior, which many experience as a loss because it drives us past the point at which we should rest, because it puts us out of joint with the cosmos, because it leaves us open to exploitation by our employers or professions, even to the point where the greatest success seems to come when we are not driven by a supervisor but when we have internalized the drive, pushing ourselves as long as the computer works, data and news on a planetary scale flows, or demand for reaction and adjustment continues – which is to say, always, unceasingly. We know that this is not healthy, not good for us. One related biochemical-physiological-psychological problem is the disturbance of our circadian rhythms, that is our internal biological rhythms for many bio-functions such as blood pressure and metabolic processes that operate on a regular 24-hour cycle (other rhythms are monthly or seasonal), providing a consistent response to regular environmental changes. Those triggered by the light-darkness cycle include sleep-wake rhythms which when disturbed enough to become disorders can cause significant problems for behavioral competence or hormone balance (e.g. of cortisol which operates on a diurnal rhythms and is critical in protecting against hypoglycemia). The loss of coordination of our bodily rhythms with those of sunlight and darkness seriously troubles nurses and medical staff working night shifts, air traffic controllers and pilots, police and fire personnel, and data processors.30
At the same time the artificial milieu of the city gives us great freedoms, open to otherwise unavailable possibilities. We can work at different times of day and week, not always because we are forced to but often at a shift that we prefer or at times that are convenient and preferable. If the most interesting part of my life occurs from midnight to dawn because I need the money, thrive on the contact with others like myself, and want to be able to listen to the music without paying the cover, I can mix work with pleasure by being a bartender or bouncer at a club during those hours. If I have kids that need to be seen off to and picked up from school, and played with before bedtime, I can be home from 7 am to 9 pm and work a night shift at the hospital. Or, I can work at home anytime in tele-commuting on a-synchronous projects where all that matters is that the work be done by a certain deadline. If an exciting project spurs me on I don’t have to quit because it becomes dark, leaving off likely to lose the thread of an idea or the momentum of a discovery. We can ice skate on an indoor rink in August, grow hydroponic vegetables in the interior of a converted factory or high-rise with grow-bulb light 24 hours a day all year long, or on a smaller scale grow marijuana at home in the basement.

Earth

It has been a recent “discovery” in the last decade that nature is not equivalent to wilderness, but also exists in the city. Of course. Perhaps exceptionally, Berlin has long considered nature as part of the urban. Originally settled in the early 13th century in the Spree valley, in the midst of glaciated plains and plains vegetated respectively with indigenous oak-hornbeam woods and pinewoods, and with a high water table with numerous bogs, in the modern era Berlin was transformed into a powerful national capital with the creation of the Prussian nation state. The Prussian kings created grand boulevards and squares; the Royal hunting grounds already opened to the public in 1740 (such as the large Große Tiergarten) were developed into landscape parks; and beautification projects touted ornamental green areas. After the mid-19th century public health and planning factions pushed for Volksgarten (people’s gardens), including planting trees for fresh air and landscaping to facilitate pleasure walks. At the turn of the century, in order to focus more on urban health, planners and social reformers generated the Volkspark (people’s park) intended as recreational-exercise grounds for sports and children’s playgrounds for the working class, especially in the areas of overly dense tenements.

Nature conservation in the first third of the 20th century set aside reserves to affirm and display landscape elements considered exemplary of national or regional identity. This was a key factor in establishing the Grünewald as a “permanent forest” in 1915, following 11 years of “public protests mounted against projected city extensions and clearing measures and against the effect of urban water use on the forest’s ground water level.” The timing for such action was critical for by then the Prussian state was already selling the forests surrounding the city to private real-estate developers who were busily creating suburbs. With the establishment of Greater Berlin as an administrative municipality in 1920 new parks and greenbelts were created, allotment associations and plots multiplied, and continued attention was given to preserving natural spaces, especially forests, at the city’s edges. The ideas of conservation as preserving the natural heritage in Berlin in the 1920s focused on sites considered particularly representative of the glacier-formed landscape of the Brandenburg region: fens, creeks, ponds, and a few sand dunes scattered around the metropolis.

Significant activities studying and planning the landscape and the call for an “urban ecology” persisted through WWII among ecological groups and neighborhood activists concerned with residents’ well-being. A large, diverse set of amateur and professional naturalists conducted field work; gardeners, hikers, interested nature lovers, and city planners had become especially accomplished at close studies of local features, appreciating and affirming that there was not a separation, but a continuum of biotic and cultural realms since the urban environment had clearly impacted the vegetation regimes for a long time. In the late 1940s, with the intention of reaffirming Berlin's identity, plans for the Tiergarten were “not intended simply to
reestablish the prewar situation; they were intended to restore features of the alder swamp and the riparian forest that once had covered the area in which the park was located.” From 1949–1952 the policy and practices of “greening,” for example with open spaces and playing fields, functioned as a mode of restoring a sense of urban order in the midst of the ruined city; also deploying many of the unemployed, it provided a means to look to better times ahead.

The broad community interested in local biotopes advocated for features historically acknowledged as characteristic of and crucial to the then–enclosed city (such as the substantial 32 square km Grünewald and its lakes, Tiergarten, and Botanical Garden in Dahlem) and also promoted appreciation of significant areas that had been abandoned and, from the viewpoint of ecology, protected, especially the abandoned Potsdamer Güterbahnhof and Personenbahnhof and Tempelhofer Rangierbahnhof railroad yards and facilities, where diverse flora and fauna were observed onward from the 1950s. Similarly, ruderal areas resulting from the shaping of rubble from the bombings into waste heaps then left unattended to quickly become wooded, were not only appreciated by botanists, but used by the homeless and by children as favorite play spaces. Overall, a great many Berliners gained an increased self-understanding that their finite urban area was distinctive and important insofar as it was uniquely constituted by the interaction of political and biological environmental processes which were worth nurturing for their own sake as well as central to delineating the identity of the city.

The contemporary phase has dramatically developed through the strong and innovative green movements of the 1980s in which the theory and practical application of eco-urbanism became well-established. The green roofs, sophisticated water retention and purification techniques workable for greening urban courtyards, and urban agriculture projects as well as alternative practices such as advocated by bicycle activists made vivid the ordinary, everyday difference that a green urban way of living could make in Berlin’s relations to earth and well-being. At times alternative planners were tensed with other ecological groups if the latter argued too vehemently for non-development at the cost of possible socially oriented projects, but coordinated with them in opposing projects that would destroy the local bio-cultural character of neighborhoods (such as the highways). There was interest by all parties in more open green spaces given the still overly dense built fabric and lack of recreational spaces, in more positive forms of vibrant community- and eco-oriented courtyards in buildings that retained the traditional Berlin scale and interior spaces rather than modernist high-rises. The open space forms, urban connections, and attendant experiential affordances that emerged are a valuable contribution to urban design and life: the open courtyards not only are central to the semi-public life of the dwelling units (as is traditional in Berlin’s morphology) but differentiate a central communal space from the areas more closely associated with the individual surrounding units, then additionally provide access to the street and nearby plätze. There appears to be significant benefit from and appreciation of the non-industrial, non-commercial character of these and other courtyard elements such as the play spaces, vegetable and flower gardens, and often greened walls. Connecting the social housing units to the urban neighborhood is a critical accomplishment “designed to accommodate the everyday reality of work, shopping, relaxing, traveling and knowing Berlin’s weather” encouraging the “inherent desire of the Berliner for public life,” indeed allowing for ordinary Berlin residents’ well-being.

Bio-ecologists and political activists agree that ecological care directly promotes the health of residents (as well as that of earth itself) and well-being of the city. In pragmatic terms it is critical to continuing an adequate material basis for living; the political struggle to maintain open spaces, vegetation, and accessible riverfronts is again a key in many dimensions of mental and physical health as well as a lively site in which public debate and choice is maintained.

Thus, the interest in the earth all along has been simultaneously ecological and political. The political charge continues in the urban ecologists’ projects of the 1990s and following to conserve and protect small pockets of flora and fauna in the form of “urban nature parks” such as Südgelände railroad area and in the recent referendum about how to use the former Tegel airport, the closing of which offered a rare resource
of open space in the dense city. The vote affirmed that loose social uses “on the grass” as it were, were valued more than merely pragmatic and economic development.

Even where economic interests dominate over local preferences Berlin is in the avant-garde of environmental innovation in design and construction. For example, part of the excitement of Potsdamer Platz is due to its advanced eco-design. Specifically, the touted “green skyscrapers” were among the first to demonstrate the viability of ecologically positive buildings. The three towers comprising the Daimler Benz Offices by Richard Rogers Partnership use natural ventilation and daylighting to manage air exchange through great vertical rises and technological devices: by orienting the building to use prevailing breezes and by employing operative windows, large atriums, air inlets and outlets, an air plenum, external vertical shading devices, and solar shading provided by variable glazing. These features, along with passive solar energy, cut the facilities’ energy usage and carbon dioxide emissions by more than 30 per cent.36 There also is an elaborate underground collection system of cisterns in which stormwater is purified and reused, providing a retention pond for enjoyment by humans and birds and an agreeable running-water feature (emulating a stream) along the shops within the site’s dense urban fabric.37 This new regime ecology does not focus on local biotopes or neighborhood green spaces, but operationalizes non-linear engineering resilience, a new approach to environmental well-being,38 though to the chagrin of advocates of everyday neighborhoods and alternative or deeply ecological localism.

Without a doubt, Berlin is “not all one.” It regularly has been described as always having been constituted variously by ecological bio-patches and politically by diverse players. It has been seen as an assemblage not a unity; “as a city of fragments”; and by Sukopp, who in arguing for an urban ecology of biotopes, noted the heterogeneity of human influences on the city’s environment:

In spite of the fact that some features are shared by the entire space of the city, it is not possible to conceive of the city as a single location. In contrast, it is a living space that resembles a mosaic, composed of many different locations.39

How do these distinctive manifestations of the earth in Berlin bear on well-being? The well-being of what and whom, for how long, especially insofar as there is no one thing that is Berlin? The core insistence on the importance of open space contributes to residents’ mental health, political freedom both in the multiplicity of uses (emphasizing the value of play and thus the connection of the earth and art) and in the decision-making processes themselves. Correlate, for all its significance as part of the city’s political dynamic it needs to be remembered that another important dimension of public art is the sheer pleasure it gives to those who create it and to many who take joy it in during their everyday experiences in the city.40

The care of the city’s water, air, and still-fertile soil all bear directly on the inhabitants’ health in several ways. Disciplined use to conserve natural resources is critical to continuing the material basis of urban life (both in regard to materials in the literal sense and to the economics of production and consumption as well the growth of new sectors providing employment and profit that range from a) environmental technologies to b) real estate development and the attraction of global capital to c) amenities for enjoyment and tourism, such as occur when the city repurchases riverfront for public use or when business owners bring in sand to create artificial beaches along the Spree. The people who gather there on an afternoon to drink a Berliner Weisse (a light, effervescent ale, by law brewed only in Berlin) made from the pure water that results from the natural processes of evaporation and precipitation, as do the grains and hops (not to mention the Spree itself), are enjoying what is brought forth from the gathering of the heavens and the earth – or should they drink a beer brewed by a monastery, at least the monks involved would hold that all this is a gift from God. So at least three, perhaps even all, of the fourfold would be gathered together.

In any case, throughout the often contending positions and activities two major features of the relation Berlin to the earth persist: first, nature and the urban are seen together – nature is taken to be an inherent urban dimension and, second, the earth as an integrated aspect of the city is experienced in the course of
everyday life (neither as an abstract idea nor as a merely symbolic dimension, but existentially). What is the same throughout all these variations is that the well-being of the earth remains related to the heavens in ecological processes and that what occurs in the city’s relation to the earth speaks at the same time, as Heidegger puts it, of mortals and their well-being and of political action as a catalyst in the gathering of the fourfold.

Conclusion

In looking at what happens in Berlin a common sense description of what we seek and do in relation to each other as persons, to the presence or absence of an urge toward any spiritual dimension, to the rhythms of our lives in the great artifact of the city that we have made, and to the natural environment generates a complex of factors that at least begin to articulate what might be meant by well-being and how we succeed or fail at attaining it to a greater or lesser degree. It turns out that these features present the same central characteristics and relationships as Heidegger’s more “poetic” view that the four dimensions of mortals and immortals, heavens and earth gather together to constitute a meaningful World. At the same time, the figure of World provides a more sophisticated and powerful means to explore the subtleties of well-being, both in terms of avoiding a reduction to one aspect (such as economic prosperity or health) and by giving a fuller interpretation of their mutual inter-determination into historical-concrete meaningful realms.

Though a “summary” of the findings is not possible since they are woven into the case itself and complexly interlinked with each other, we can at least remember that through describing Berlin it becomes clear that health is far more than the absence of illness; that it is a matter of the capacity of a specific individual to carry on in her own lifeworld as she would choose, and more than that, to be open to develop capabilities she may not have had before a sickness; that though a matter (which also creates the Spree itself) of her own life as an individual it also is a matter of relationship to other people, what they give and whether they help her or not, what they do creates stress or empathetically provides support, of what sorts of institutional care and service is available to her, of whether the group is at war or at peace. It is a matter of her relation to the earth and its resources, remembering that as embodied she is humus, made of the earth (and that our relation to nature is also inextricably political); it is a matter of her relations to the rhythms of the heavens. (The tangle in just that small, partial review of health shows that a summary is not possible.) The city showed how individuality is a matter of the multiplicity that a person is (in different places and times, in differing activities and uses of the cities affordances, in plural relationships); that choice and freedom (exemplified in art and politics) are fundamental to what it means to be a person; that openness to what we might become is crucial (since what that might be that itself is entirely open); that it also is a matter of one’s own particularity being possible only as being-with-others-in-a-shared world (especially but not only in one’s local neighborhood or scene, making do within the frictions of the heterogeneous city), which means being able to participate politically in the contested struggle for decent jobs, adequate goods and services such as health care and education, and affordable housing. Which connects with the importance of reflection, of deliberately choosing mortality, as Wenders’ angels showed us echoing Odysseus, but that this not only entails accepting our coming death but embracing the openness to our existential possibilities. Given all this, it is clear that well-being is not simply “one thing,” but instead a dynamic emergent state to which we aspire, toward which we journey if we are able to move away from impoverishment in regard to the mutually interactive features – where the heterogeneity of the city provides an exceptional site and means for such a state to emerge and be maintained.

In fact, then, this approach is able a) to include all the significant aspects that more limited theories of well-being propose as important, but now in their dynamic co-constitution through reciprocal positive feedbacks so that we are able to discern far more nuances of each element and the whole – to use the vocabulary of complexity theory rather than Heidegger’s terms that say “all four dimensions occur in a gathering within which, simultaneously, each comes to its own” – and b) to complement the valuable
findings of other approaches ranging from philosophical anthropology, psychotherapy, and health care to complexity theory and ecology (as with the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*).

### Notes

1. This is the list of the fundamental features necessary for well-being identified in the United Nation’s *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated considerations of the topic.

2. Important work that advocates and practices a reduction of well-being include those that focus on the economics of time use, goods, and utility (Krueger, 2009), on utilitarian approaches with a focus on measurement (Griffin, 1986), and on the Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (Smith, 1995); significant broader approaches include Nussbaum’s on developing capabilities (2011), the focus on psychological wellness and community change (Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006), as well as the older hedonic approach (Kahneman et al., 1999).

3. In Heidegger’s ontological terms the city would be a “thing” that gathers the fourfold; in the complementary ontic terms the same is said with greater sensitivity and in concrete detail by James Hillman who appreciates the importance of the built environment and things, as well as of conflicting forces, to the well-being of the soul (2006). For a short, focused account of thing and fourfold see Mugerauer, 1995.

4. Thus, this essay does not yet again rehearse the ideas in the vast literature on the city (ranging from Simmel to Sennett and Hillman) important though that task is. Nor do I directly enter the debates about the contested meaning of well-being, systematically covering all the major factors and their possible combinations. Rather, the goal is to carry out a more fundamental case study through which concrete empirical findings can emerge and be reasonably interpreted.


15. Ibid., p. 12.


17. [1048–1069] – references in brackets are to numbered shots in *Der Himmel Über Berlin*, nd.

18. [5038–5044].


20. [5046–5052].

21. [2050].


23. [5068–5076].


32. Lachmund, 2013, 30. In the section on 20th-century Berlin ecological movements I draw substantially from Lachmund as well as Lekan, 2004. For more on the relationships among contending groups and the real estate, speculative market since the wall came down, see Mugerauer, 2015.


37 Mugerauer, 2011.
38 Mugerauer and Liao, 2012.
40 Carver, 2018.

References

Der Himmel Ü ber Berlin: Ein Filmbuch von Wim Wenders und Peter Handke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag).


